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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

NOVEMBER, 1966 VOL. 2, No. 4

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE THRUSH FROM THRUSH AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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THE THRUSH FROM THRUSH AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Angel . . . femme fatale . . . or devil incarnate? Who was the slim blonde girl who spoke three tongues, charmed three spy rings—and killed with a smile? Today Solo and Illya must know—or die also . . .

ACT I—FOR SOME THE SONGBIRDS SING

THE CAFE LEIDER is on the East Side of New York, hidden in one of the small, dead-end streets that border the East River. A narrow alley above the river itself leads to the stage door. The main entrance, on the small side street, is restrained—there is only a simple small canopy marked, "Cafe Leider."

The people who went in under this canopy were well-dressed and animated, excited and on-the-town for the night. Inside, the cafe was small and dim and intimate. It was quiet, almost silent, although it was crowded. People packed the tables and the small bar; the waiters could hardly move among the packed tables. There was smoke, and the movement of glasses.

But no one spoke or made a

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FEATURING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN

noise. There was a reason for this —every face in the smoky room was turned to the tiny stage and the small woman who stood beside the piano and sang.

She was a blonde, small and petite. She sang in a throaty voice that was all her own, and that seemed to hold, even transfix her rapt audience. She was no longer a young woman, but it did not matter. Her beauty was more than youth or prettiness. There was all the conventional beauty, the polished good looks, the bones that all great beauties have, but there was more. Hers was a quality of beauty years could never touch. There was a grooming that marks the woman of the Continent, a beauty that years can only enhance, an elegance that had to be born in a woman.

She sang her low, phrased, throaty songs as if she sang each song to each single listener alone. The smoky timbre of her voice somehow made each song seem new, heard for the first time, and understood personally by each listener, whether it was a song in German, or in French, or in English. She sang the songs, old and new, in all three languages, moving easily from one language to the other as if each were her native tongue.

On the stage she moved little, making each small gesture of her hands, each faint movement of her neck and face seem momentous. Her sophisticated style gave each song, no matter how small or banal or familiar, the style of the grand manner, the great world of life itself. She sang of Paris and of London; of Rome and of Vienna; of Berlin both before and after it was a divided city.

Between songs she spoke, told anecdotes of Europe in her soft Viennese accent, and the tales charmed her silent audience as much as her song.

Her name was Lilli Kessler, who was born in Vienna but had made the world her home, and she held her audience in rapt silence in the dim and smoky supper club. They drank, the audience, but they did not speak, and were content to sit there in the dim light and watch her, listen as if they were each sure she sang only for them.

All except two men.

One of these men was a heavy-set, burly man who walked into the Cafe Leider at that moment. He wore evening clothes of expensive cut, but he was not out for an evening of pleasure. He stood for a time in the entrance from the bar, surveying the room like a man studying flies pinned to a board. He paid no attention to the petite blonde *diseuse*. He walked slowly through the crowded room, still studying faces as if Lilli Kessler were not singing at all.

He reached a table that was empty despite the crowd. It was near the stage on the right side. He

sat down. And then, as if to show he was interested in the petite blonde, he looked up at her, nodded and smiled.

The second man who was not under the spell of the smoky-voiced *chanteuse,* was a waiter. He was a small, dark-haired waiter with a thick Continental mustache. He had barely looked at the blonde on the tiny stage. He, too, had been surveying the room. But he ceased his watch when the heavy-set man in evening clothes came in.

The waiter stared at the burly man, his eyes following the man's slow progress through the room to the table. When the man sat down, the waiter bent over the pencil he held ready to take orders.

"Control Central, this is Bubba. Report Manfred Burton in Cafe Leider. Burton in Cafe. This is Bubba."

TWO

IN A SMALL office crowded with electronic equipment, and hidden behind a row of innocent-seeming brownstone buildings on the East Side of New York near the United Nations, two men sat around a round table. This was the office of Alexander Waverly, Section I member, and chief of The United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—better known as U.N.C.L.E. The office of Waverly was the final heart of the great complex of impregnable corridors and rooms behind the innocent facade of the quiet brownstones.

On the roof of the buildings was a giant billboard that was actually an antenna that kept New York Control Central of U.N.C.L.E. in touch with all the far-flung operations of the secret organization that had been established to fight international crime everywhere. Beneath the street were the secret tunnels to the river. Under constant guard, no one entered or left U.N.C.L.E. headquarters without complete scrutiny and permission.

Now, in his office that was the nerve center of the worldwide efforts of U.N.C.L.E., Waverly held a microphone in his hand and listened to a voice that came from the speaker console to his right. The man with Waverly, Napoleon Solo, Chief Enforcement Officer,

The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

Section II of U.N.C.L.E., leaned closer to hear.

The voice was the voice of the waiter in the Cafe Lieder.

". . .Report Manfred Burton in Cafe Leider. Burton in cafe. This is Bubba."

Waverly pressed a button on his microphone. "Very good, Mr., *uh,* Kuryakin. Continue surveillance. Do not do anything. I am sending Mr. Solo to join you."

"What if he leaves?" the voice of the waiter in the smoky supper club said.

Illya Kuryakin, disguised as the waiter, bent over the pencil and watched all around at the same time, his eyes alert and bright beneath his lowered brow.

"Then follow him, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said drily. "But do nothing if he does nothing. You understand? I don't want them alerted."

"Yes sir," Kuryakin said from his corner in the cafe, his disguised face set in an enigmatic smile at his chief's dry voice.

Waverly clicked off his microphone and turned to Solo. The chief enforcement agent for U.N.C.L.E. was a handsome man of medium height. Slender and well-dressed, Solo looked like no more than a minor junior executive, a gay young man about town, one of the thousands of elegant young men with too much money and too much time on their hands.

But he was none of these things; he was a trained agent, deadly with all weapons, both hands, and his brain.

"So, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "As you see, we have a new project. It's fortunate you finished that Peruvian business when you did."

"Yes sir," Solo said. "I gather, then, my vacation will be delayed again?"

"Vacation? No time for that nonsense."

Solo sighed. He had visions of his planned days on the beach at Cannes with a lady he had met in Peru. She would expect him, and he would not be there. Poor girl. He sighed again, and smiled at his chief.

"I gather that this is a big one?"

"Big?" Waverly said. "Big?"

The gruff chief of U.N.C.L.E. New York began to search in his pockets. His pipe, filled, was clamped in the center of his aristocratic bloodhound face, but there seemed to be no matches. A man who rarely smiled, Waverly's age was hard to determine, but had to be between the late fifties and late sixties. His iron grey hair was shaggy, his eyes deceptively innocent beneath bushy brows, his face solemn as he searched in his old tweed suit for a match.

Finally, Napoleon Solo handed him a package.

Waverly took the matches with a muttered acknowledgment, but with neither surprise nor the faintest smile. When he spoke again,

his pipe lighted, it was in his usual calm, clipped manner.

"Would you say, Mr. Solo, that the opportunity to perhaps destroy the entire THRUSH operation in North America was big?"

"The entire operation?" Solo said.

"Perhaps finish two of their leaders, and prevent a very bad triumph for them?"

Solo's eyes brightened. They almost snapped with eager interest. "I would say that was big, yes, sir."

"That's good of you, Mr. Solo," Waverly said drily. "I would say that it could be the chink in their armor we have been looking. Perhaps the beginning of the end for THRUSH."

"But how, sir?" Solo said, his eyes no longer the innocent eyes of the young pleasure-seeker.

"How? By taking advantage of the one major weakness THRUSH has—their inability to transfer power in an orderly manner. In short, Mr. Solo, I think we may have them fighting among themselves!"

Solo's eyes flashed in the silence of the office as Waverly let his words sink in.

THREE

SOLO LEANED forward across the round table. "Fighting among themselves?"

Waverly puffed on his pipe, nodded. "Our information leaves no possibility of doubt. Augustus Bartz died suddenly last week while you were in Peru. Apparently of natural causes, although we can't be absolutely sure."

"THRUSH has ways of inducing 'natural causes,' " Solo said.

"Precisely," Waverly agreed. "But that, of course, is not our particular concern. The main thing is that Bartz is dead."

"Which leaves THRUSH without an operational chief for all of North America," Solo said, and he pursed his lips in a low whistle. "It means that all Bartz's sub-leaders have no one to take orders from outside THRUSH council itself."

"Exactly, Mr. Solo," Waverly said, "and at a very bad time for THRUSH. Only two weeks ago the full design details for the latest United States rocket were stolen. It had all the marks of a THRUSH venture, and of Bartz in particular. I would say with considerable certainty that Bartz had those design plans."

Solo whistled. "Two weeks ago? Bartz must have delivered them by now."

Waverly searched for a match; his pipe had gone out. "No, I think not. Bartz only had the week, and we have it on reliable report that Bartz was anxious to deliver the plans himself—a coup. Apparently the North American branch had not done too much of late, and you know THRUSH. Results, that is all that counts for them. No, Bartz

had the plans on him when he died, I know that. The question is, who has them now? The THRUSH council has not met for some time. Their scheduled meeting was this month somewhere in Europe

"They know of the rocket plans, and of Bartz's death. They will probably advance the date of their meeting to deal with the problem. As you know, only the THRUSH council has the right, or the power for that matter, to appoint a new North American operational chief. Even then, they cannot appoint just anyone. As I said, THRUSH has no machinery for an organized transfer of power. The death of Bartz automatically means a power struggle among his chief assistants. Council will have to accept the power structure here in North America. They will have to choose the sub-leader with the greatest power."

"That's why you have Illya watching Manfred Burton?" Solo said.

Waverly nodded. He had found a match, and now lighted his pipe again as he talked.

"The choice must be between Burton and Walter Hand. There is no doubt of that. As far as we know, they are quite evenly matched—Burton in the East, Hand in the West. Only Bartz kept them from fighting each other before this. THRUSH will have the problem of choosing one, and risking the reaction of the other."

"They won't choose," Solo said. "They'll let them fight it out and accept the winner."

"True, Mr. Solo, but in this case there is another factor—the rocket plans. As you are well aware, THRUSH operates on a pure free-enterprise principle. The unit of THRUSH that does a successful job gets all the profit from it, less only the share to council. Which means—"

"Which means that whoever gets and delivers those plans will have a big reward to split up," Solo said. "With that much money, and the power it brings, the winner can probably steal most of the losers' men away!"

"Yes, that is the way I think it must work. THRUSH people serve only winners. A coup like the rocket plans would set up either Burton or Hand, and the loser's men would almost certainly desert to the winner."

"And THRUSH will wait to see," Solo said.

"Exactly," Waverly said. "Therefore your job, Mr. Solo, is to join Mr. Kuryakin and prevent either Burton or Hand getting those plans. You will have to locate them and secure them for us. If you also can help Hand and Burton to eliminate each other, so much the better."

"What makes you sure one of them doesn't already have the plans?" Solo said.

"That I'm afraid I can't tell even

you, Mr. Solo, but accept my word that they do not. They are also both much too busy looking to have the plans. Neither has left the country —as they would have if they had the plans to deliver."

"What made you pick the Cafe Leider as a starting place?"

Waverly frowned as his pipe had gone out again. He drew strongly to see if he could light it. "Various reasons, Mr. Solo. First, Manfred Burton is known to frequent the place. Second, we have suspected it of being some kind of link in THRUSH for some time. Third, Augustus Bartz was traced to the Cafe Leider only hours before he died."

"Three good reasons," Solo said.

"I rather thought so," Waverly said drily.

Solo stood up, grinned. "So, then, all we have to do is get plans THRUSH already has, and help Burton and Hand eliminate each other."

"That's all," Waverly said, once again drawing on his cold pipe. "I'm sure you'll find a clever way to manage it, Mr. Solo."

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO entered the Cafe Leider wearing the evening dress worn by most of the other patrons of the swank supper club. The *maitre* regretted that he had no tables, and Solo went to the bar. From the bar he watched the

crowded cafe. The petite blonde was still singing her smoky songs in the elegant Continental style. The patrons still sat in transfixed silence, caught by her spell. Solo watched her with more than a little interest. There was a strange magnetism to Lilli Kessler, a quality of warmth and sympathy for all men in trouble. She sang of a sad world, but bittersweet sad, sadness with a beauty of hope.

Solo tore his eyes from the elegant blonde singer, and saw a small, dark-haired waiter watching him. Solo gave a slight nod to indicate to Illya that he had seen the small Russian. Illya, in turn, inclined his head toward the front table, where the heavy-set, burly man sat all alone and watched the petite *chanteuse*.

Solo studied the man. This, then,

was Manfred Burton, one of the two men who had the power to take over all of THRUSH in North America.

Burton looked like a well-to-do business man who had come up the hard way. He had the aura of a self-made man, and Burton was. Solo knew his history only too well. Born a simple Iowa farm boy, Manfred Burton had cheated his first victim at the age of sixteen. The proceeds from this swindle, too clever to be detected, had enabled the simple farm boy to enter and leave Harvard Law School with highest honors.

From there his rise had been meteoric, if not always either legal or savory, until he became one of the most successful and feared corporation lawyers in the country. At the pinnacle, it had seemed that there was nowhere for Burton to go, but he had found a place—THRUSH. He was known to own two governors and countless mayors, and to wield a sinister power up and down the Atlantic seaboard.

Now, Burton was at his ease and watching the petite blonde Lilli Kessler. The elegant woman had begun to walk slowly around her tiny stage as she sang to special men in the audience. Solo felt his eyes drawn as if by a magnet to her. But he saw something from the corner of his eye.

Illya was signaling. Solo looked at the Russian in the waiter's disguise. Illya nodded to a table near the front.

A tall, thin man in evening clothes was staring at Lilli Kessler and slowly writing on a pad in front of him.

Solo narrowed his sharp eyes. A man does not usually take notes in a supper club. In the crowd of Lilli Kessler's devotees, the writing man stood out like a fox in a chicken yard. But no one else seemed to be watching him. All eyes turned still to the blonde Lillie Kessler and her songs.

Then the petite blonde saw the man writing. Her eyes seemed to flash fire as she watched the man. Her slow progress around the tiny stage came to a halt. She stared at the man, her eyes fiery and her aristocratic nostrils flaring as she watched the man who continued to write, oblivious to her stare. She had not stopped singing, but now she stepped forward to the edge of the tiny stage, and sang directly to the man, stopping in her song from time to time to make comments.

"Are we bothering your concentration, sir?"

And she sang a line, two lines, soft and low and smoky as the room itself.

"Writing a letter to his wife, darlings; how sweet."

Two more lines, a third, and into the chorus, her throaty voice vibrating the room.

"*Liebchen,* a poem to me! Of course, ah, romance is not dead."

The full chorus, amid, now, the laughter of the patrons, necks that craned to see through the room. The man himself suddenly aware of what was going on. Until now he had been so wrapped in what he was doing that he had not heard. Now he looked up, flushed.

"There, he isn't deaf! Forgive me, *cheri,* I was sure you were afflicted. Perhaps you rewrite the lyrics, yes? Of course, that must be it. Darling, they are such nice lyrics. Ah, but I am tired of you. You bore me, *liebchen;* you write when you must listen. Good-by!"

With a final chorus of her song, the petite blonde turned and walked away, waved to her admirers, and left the stage. There was a wave of violent applause. She came back, blew kisses, and the applause doubled. Solo smiled as he watched her. She was an expert, a professional, and she held the room in the palm of her small hand. All eyes were on her as she blew one more round of kisses and left.

Solo looked at Manfred Burton, who was standing to applaud, and then, smiling, glanced toward where the man who had been writing was sitting.

The man was slumped over the table.

Solo jumped up and walked casually but swiftly out of the bar and across the crowded, now noisy room toward the slumped man. He was second. A tall, very skinny waiter was at the table. Solo, so as not to be observed, approached the table and the slumped man obliquely, as if going somewhere else.

The waiter saw him but was not aware that Solo was coming to the table also. As Solo came near, the waiter picked up the paper the man had been writing on, slipped it inside his jacket, and walked away.

Solo reached the man. The man's face was down on the table, his shoulders against the edge of the table, his arms dangling limp. Solo touched him, turned him to look, but he did not have to—he knew a dead man when he saw one. His keen eyes saw no marks on the body, but the lips were blue. Solo sniffed the man's glass without picking it up. Bitter almonds—cyanide. Almost certainly administered by the tall, skinny waiter, but on whose order?

Solo turned quickly to see Manfred Burton watching him. Near the door, and at the entrance to the bar, other men were now watching —men of a type Solo knew too well. Solo looked for the tall, skinny waiter and saw him just reaching the side, where a curtain covered an alcove. The waiter had walked casually so as not to attract attention. Solo saw Illya watching the entire action.

Before anyone knew what was happening, Solo ran across the room, among the crowded tables, in pursuit of the skinny waiter. Illya stood against the wall to cover him in case anyone followed. Solo broke

through the curtain and found himself in a small corridor that led to a door. The door was open.

Solo ran down the corridor and out through the door. He ran out into a dark night. Light shimmered on the river below. He was in the dark alley that ran narrow between the cafe and the river. He looked for the waiter. The alley was dead end to his right; the river was in front. He looked to the left. At first he saw nothing. Then he saw the waiter.

The skinny man was just up the alley toward where it opened into the small street in front of the cafe. He still held the paper he had taken from the dead man. In his other hand he held something else. Solo started to move toward him and stopped. The waiter raised his arm and threw the object in his right hand.

Solo jumped back.

A cloud of yellowish vapor burst in the alley between Solo and the waiter.

Illya Kuryakin stood against the wall at his waiter's station and watched Manfred Burton and his men. Solo had gone past him, and Illya's small, Slavic face was alert as he observed the men of THRUSH. But they did nothing. Manfred Burton simply walked to the dead man, looked at him, called the *maitre,* and told the *maitre* to call the police.

By now the crowd of Lilli Kessler fans had begun to notice that something was wrong. They milled through the room, talked at their tables, and many looked toward the slumped form of the dead man. The THRUSH men had vanished. Illya left his post and went backstage.

In the corridor that led to the dressing rooms, the disguised U.N.C.L.E. agent paused long enough to observe the entire corridor. His bright, quick eyes were shrewd beneath the habitually lowered brow. Kuryakin was listening. The corridor appeared empty. He moved soundlessly along the empty passage until he came to the door with a star marked simply: *Kessler.* He did not knock. The door was not locked. He opened it silently and slipped inside.

Lilli Kessler was not there. Illya heard sounds behind the dressing screen in the corner. His sharp eyes took in the room at a glance. There should have been a maid, or a dresser. Illya heard footsteps hurrying outside the door. He stepped back. The door opened and a big, grey-haired woman came in. She walked straight to the screen.

"Miss Kessler? There's trouble. A man's been killed out front."

The petite blonde appeared from behind the screen. She was wearing a dazzling green robe now.

"Zip me up, Helga," the blonde said.

The big woman walked behind her and zipped up the robe.

"Right at his table, dead," Helga

said. "That man who was writing."

"All right, don't start—" and Lilli Kessler stopped.

The big woman stared. They had both seen Illya. Lilli Kessler did not blink.

"What do you want? Did I order something?" the petite blonde singer said.

"Did you?" Illya said, his quizzical eyes on the woman.

"When I need a waiter, I'll send for one. Now get out of here if you value your job!"

"Did you order something, Miss Kessler? Say, perhaps, a murder?"

The big woman grunted, stepped toward Illya Kuryakin. The Russian U.N.C.L.E. agent watched the big woman carefully. She moved like someone who knew how to use all the strength she had in her big frame. Lilli Kessler waved the big woman to a halt.

"No, Helga, our friend is playing a game," the blonde said. She smiled her most charming smile. Illya saw the danger in the smile—the smile of a tiger. "So, you are not a waiter, my young friend. And that, I am sure, is not your face, no? Not the police, no, your hands are too clean. Tell me what you are, *liebchen?*"

"You sang straight to him," Illya said. "No one else really noticed him. You talked to him. Perhaps you know what he was writing."

"CIA, perhaps, or MI-Five? You have an accent. British, I think, and yet not a native. Russian, yes, there is a touch of the Russian. What does a Russian agent want with me?"

"Let me handle him, Lilli," the big Helga said.

Illya smiled his enigmatic smile. "Perhaps she did it for you. What was so important about him? Was he against Manfred Burton?"

The big Helga snarled. Lilli Kessler watched Illya.

"Get out of here!" the petite blonde said.

Illya never heard them approach. One minute he was facing the two angry, shaken women, and the next four men stood in the room all around the U.N.C.L.E. agent. They ringed him, their faces set and hard.

FIVE

NAPOLEON SOLO threw himself backwards in the alley. He covered his face with his handkerchief. Beyond the cloud of spreading yellow vapor he saw the indistinct shape of the skinny waiter running away into the small street. He would not catch the skinny waiter now. The yellow gas was beginning to reach him. Solo went over the parapet into the river in a long dive.

Under the surface of the fast-moving river he went down and down. He battled the treacherous current of the river, which was not really a river but a swirling tidal arm of the sea. The currents caught

him and tumbled him. He was swept down. He fought and broke free of the current. His lungs were on the edge of bursting when another current swept him up and he burst out onto the dark surface in the night.

Solo immediately began to swim back toward where he had dived into the river. The current buffeted him. He headed for a series of steps that led up from the river to the small street of the cafe.

He saw the boat. It came out of the shadows at the foot of the steps that led up to the street. It came fast and directly toward him where he trod water. A man stood at the wheel of the fast speedboat, and the skinny waiter stood beside him. Then a blinding light shone full in Solo's face. Where he trod water he calculated the speed of the boat. The light was a great dazzling ball when he took a breath and submerged. He forced his body as far down as it would go.

The boat roared over him, its propellers missing with the force of the wash of water tumbling him about like a chunk of cork.

He came up in the churning wake. The boat did not turn, but roared straight on and vanished into the dark night. Solo watched it until it was out of sight. Whatever had been on that paper the waiter had stolen from the dead man was more important than a second attempt to kill him. Solo knitted his brow. What had the murdered man been writing so diligently in the cafe?

Still considering this, Solo began to swim for the steps at the foot of the small street.

Illya Kuryakin looked slowly around at the four men who had come into Lilli Kessler's dressing room. They ringed him. One of them smiled at him.

"Well, Mr. Kuryakin. This is a pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine," Illya said.

Lilli Kessler was furious.

"Now we have a meeting, yes? Apparently you are all friends. Perhaps you will tell me what this is about?" the petite blonde said angrily.

The leader of the four still smiled. "We are indeed all friends, eh, Kuryakin? As to what it is about, Miss Kessler, I fear it is a simple mistake. My friend Kuryakin is in the wrong room. Isn't that right, Kuryakin?"

"I think—" Illya began. He did not finish. He smiled as two of the men stepped closer to him and he felt the faint prick of a needle against his arm. One of the men held a hypodermic against his arm. They all smiled at him. He smiled back.

"I think I have made an error," Illya finished. "My friends here have convinced me. I got into the wrong room, it seems. My apologies, *mademoiselle.*"

Lilli Kessler looked from one to

the other. She threw up her hands.

"Madmen! First this one comes in and makes insane statements, then you four appear and say it is all a mistake! Imbeciles, get out! An *artiste* cannot even get dressed in peace! Go!"

The leader bowed. "Immediately, Madam. I'm surprised at you, Kuryakin. Such a mistake, to bother the lady."

"I'm a little surprised myself," Illya said. "I really—"

He felt the touch of the needle and said no more. The leader of the four men beamed at him.

"Then I really think we should leave. A lady must have her privacy. A thousand apologies, madam, for my ill-mannered friend."

"I shall try to forget it all," the petite blonde said.

"My admiration," the leader said with another faint bow.

"And mine," Illya said.

The needle touched his skin through his waiter's jacket. He straightened up. The four men led him slowly from the room with the leader still expressing courtly apologies.

In the empty passage outside the dressing room, the four men moved quickly. The leader instantly dropped his elegant manner. He curtly motioned his men toward the stage door. He snapped at Illya.

"Very well, Kuryakin, move!"

"That's more like the THRUSH I know," Illya said.

"Move!" the leader hissed.

Illya felt the needle, and he moved. He walked between two of the men, each one holding an arm. They paraded this way along the dressing room corridor until they reached the stage door. The leader pushed Illya through and out into the night in the alley beside the river. Sirens split the night; already the revolving red light of a police car blocked the end of the narrow alley.

"Be very careful, Kuryakin," the leader of the THRUSH men said. "We are all friends out for a casual stroll. You understand?"

"I understand," Illya said.

"Let us hope so. If you should do anything foolish it would not be pleasant for you or for some of

those policemen. We are quite ready."

"Of course," Illya said.

His quick eyes took in the entire scene in a glance. Police were in the alley and inside the cafe. The single car was parked so as to block the alley. Two policemen stood near the car. The river was to the right, and the end of the alley was the only other way out.

"Just be casual," the THRUSH leader said.

They walked him toward the mouth of the alley and the police patrol car with its revolving red light like a splash of blood in the night. The point of the needle just brushed his skin through the sleeve of the waiter's jacket. They were on all sides of him. The police looked at them as they approached. One of the policemen stepped forward. The leader of the THRUSH group smiled.

"Good evening, officer. A very unfortunate affair."

"Messy," the patrolman said. "You boys going somewhere?"

Illya tensed. The police were not letting anyone leave yet. It was his only chance. If the police tried to stop them, they would probably attempt to fight their way out. In the fight, Illya would have his only opportunity to break away—he did not think he would get another chance. They had probably killed the man in the cafe; they would not hesitate to use the same poison on him, or on the police.

He gathered his muscles in readiness.

The THRUSH man only smiled again. He held out a piece of paper. The policeman took the paper and looked at it.

"Your lieutenant already interrogated us, officer. He gave us the pass. He has our names and addresses."

The policemen looked at the paper, nodded, and stepped back. He half saluted the THRUSH spokesman.

"Okay, sir. I guess that lets you out."

"Thank you," the spokesman said.

The THRUSH men all began to walk past the patrol car. Illya felt the needle and there was nothing he could do but walk with them.

As he raised himself from the river and began to climb the steps up to the small street, Solo heard voices directly above. Sirens in the distance were coming closer. Directly above him a red light flashed intermittently like a bloody finger in the night.

He moved up the steps and raised his head cautiously. He saw the police patrol car that blocked the mouth of th ealley. Two policemen stood beside the car. Far up the alley another policeman stood at the stage door. But it was not the policemen Solo looked at. It was a group of five men who stood at the police car, one of them talking and smiling with one of the patrolmen.

He did not recognize the four men, but he knew the fifth—Illya Kuryakin!

They continued to talk, and Solo watched. There was something wrong. He saw that it was the way Illya was standing, the way the two men on either side stood so close to the small Russian, their right hands not visible. He saw one imperceptibly move his right hand. The man had something threatening Illya.

Then two things happened at the same time. Illya, and the four other men, began to walk away past the police car and into the small side street. Solo saw a long, black car parked in the side street. At the same instant, a squad of police and customers came out the front door of the Cafe Lieder. For the next few minutes the street would be filled with people.

Solo came up into the street. His clothes dripped from the water of the river. As he stepped into the small street he slipped and staggered. He saw the patrolman at the police car look at him and smile. The patrolman thought he was drunk. He decided instantly to let the police think just that.

Solo began to stagger along the street, straight toward the four men slowly walking Illya to the black car. The squad of police came toward the river. The patrons leaving the Cafe Leider en masse filled the street. The four men leading Illya were clearly worried about the sudden crowd and did not look behind them.

Solo, moving fast despite his drunk act, was right behind the four just as they reached the black car. The police were close. The crowd of agitated customers milled around, looking for cabs. Solo knew he had to time it perfectly, had to make the one necessary move before anyone knew what had happened. Suddenly, he began to sing loudly and bumped into the man on Illya's left—the man who had made the move revealing that he had some threat against Illya.

Solo, singing and staggering, hit the man's arm hard. The man swore. Solo grabbed his arm as if to catch his balance.

"Whoops! Whoa there! Who you tryin' to knock down?" Solo said, holding the arm very tight and then pulling it sharply.

"Get the hell—" the man snarled.

The other THRUSH men, caught by surprise, stood there uncertain just what to do. Solo staggered, twisted the arm of the man he held. The man grunted. There was a sharp tinkle of glass falling to the street and breaking.

Now Illya Kuryakin moved. He knocked down the man on his right who was reaching into his pocket. The THRUSH spokesman hesitated. Solo swayed and shouted. The THRUST leader hesitated too long. Solo swayed and shouted. The police came toward the group. Illya

held Solo up, smiling and talking very soothingly.

"Take it easy, Mr. Jones," Illya said. "Now, come on; we'll get you home before you catch pneumonia. Come on, now."

The police arrived. They looked at Solo. Illya smiled to them. The four THRUSH men stood wondering what they could do. The top policeman of the group, a sergeant, nodded to Illya.

"Your friend is a little drunk."

"I'm afraid he is very drunk, officer," Illya said. "It seems he took a midnight swim. But I can take care of him now."

"Well—" the sergeant began, and looked at the four THRUSH men. "You all together?"

"We—" the THRUSH spokesman began, seeing a chance.

Illya was quicker. "We never met. These gentlemen were just good enough to help me look for Mr. Jones. We were all in the cafe, you see, but your lieutenant already talked to us. Isn't that right, gentlemen?"

The THRUSH spokesman stared at Illya for a long second. His hand was in his pocket. Then he shrugged, and took his hand out.

"Yes, that is correct, officers. Now, if you don't mind, I think we have to leave."

"And I'll just help my friend to our car," Illya said.

"Well," the sergeant said, "all right. But you see that he doesn't get into any trouble, you hear?"

"Of course, officer," Illya said, and grinned at the four THRUSH men. "Thank you for the help, gentlemen."

"Think nothing of it," the spokesman said. "Perhaps we will meet again."

"I'm sure we will," Illya said. "Come on, Mr. Jones."

Illya helped the staggering Solo along the street. Solo continued his act, singing and waving his arms. The police were still watching them. They staggered along the small dead-end street and went around the corner out of sight. Instantly, Solo straightened up.

"Thank you," Illya said.

"Don't give it a thought," Solo said.

"You went for a swim," Illya said. "A sudden urge?"

"Our friends play rough," Solo said, and told Illya about his escapade with the skinny waiter.

"They did not want what that man wrote to get out," Illya said. "My friends were definitely THRUSH, but were they connected to that waiter?"

"The two factions, perhaps?" Solo said.

"Possibly."

The two agents peered cautiously aroud the corner. The black car had gone. The crowd had thinned. The police were all far up the street near the river. Illya nodded to Solo.

"I still want to talk to Lilli Kessler," the small Russian said.

"She sang to the man, pointed him out," Solo said.

"I had the same thought," Illya said. "Our THRUSH friends acted as if they didn't know her, but they arrived most conveniently."

"You think she fingered him?"

"I think it highly possible," Illya said.

"Then let's go and—"

Illya held up his hand. They were still standing at the corner. Solo peered around. He saw Lilli Kessler leaving the cafe with Manfred Burton. The high THRUSH leader held her arm in a gesture of close familiarity, and guided her into his chauffered limousine. The limousine came to the corner and passed. Solo and Illya watched the petite blonde laughing in the back seat with the burly figure of Manfred Burton beside her.

They seemed undisturbed by the death of a man in front of her.

SIX

IT WAS DARK outside the window of Alexander Waverly's office. The city was as silent as it ever was in the early hours of the morning. The office was also silent. Solo and Illya were seated at the round table watching their chief as he listened intently on the private telephone. Finally, Alexander Waverly nodded.

"Very well. Continue the study," the unsmiling U.N.C.L.E. chief said, and hung up. He chewed on his unlighted pipe. "The man who was killed at the Cafe Leider was an agent of Interpol. The police don't have the details yet, but our Paris office reports that his name was Marcel Montand, and he was working on a THRUSH courier system. It seems to have led him to the cafe!"

"Where he was killed," Illya said.

"Where he was writing something," Solo said.

Waverly sucked on his empty pipe. The bushy-browed Section-I leader seemed to notice that the pipe was empty. He stared at it. Then, absently, he took his tobacco pouch from his pocket and began to fill the pipe. Solo and Illya watched their chief. It was Solo who spoke first.

"A man was killed. A waiter took what he had written. The waiter was prepared to evade pursuit and had a getaway arranged. He was also obviously no waiter," the handsome chief agent said.

"And I was kidnapped by obvious THRUSH agents who knew me," Illya said. "Manfred Burton

was there in the cafe, and he left with the Kessler woman. Lilli Kessler's maid is obviously also a kind of bodybuard."

Waverly had his pipe filled. He found a match immediately this time. He lighted his pipe, puffed.

"Precisely," Waverly said as if hearing the unspoken thoughts of his two enforcement agents. "Are we dealing with one section of THRUSH, or two? Are we, for that matter, dealing with THRUSH and someone else? Which group, if there were two, killed Montand and why? It would seem, gentlemen, that THRUSH has not located the plans for the rocket yet. However, it would also seem that there may be something beside the rocket plans involved."

"What do we know about Walter Hand?" Illya said. "I know enough about Burton."

Waverly pressed a button on his desk. The wall opened to reveal a screen. Waverly pressed another button and leaned down to speak into a microphone.

"Walter Hand file, Miss Heatherly, if you please."

Solo had his usual mental vision of the beautiful, red-headed May Heatherly seated in her file room, as cool and as efficient as she was beautiful. He sighed. May did not see eye-to-eye with Solo on fraternization among U.N.C.L.E. people. But Solo put this tragedy out of his mind as the picture of a small, fat man flashed onto the screen.

There were four pictures first, showing Walter Hand from all angles. The THRUSH sub-leader was almost as round as he was tall. His left eye dropped in a sleepy manner, but the expression in his eyes was not sleepy.

"A very dangerous man," Waverly said. "I knew him once. He was an American intelligence agent until he decided that he wanted a great deal more than a normal government could give him. He was suspected of being a double, even triple agent, but there was never any proof. He got his start by exposing a Soviet agent to the Nazis in World War II, for which he was paid handsomely. It was then suspected that he engineered the exposure of two Nazi agents to the Russians. Again, for a handsome reward."

"A nice man," Solo said.

The last picture showed Walter Hand smiling at the camera, for all the world like some beaming and innocent businessman on a vacation. The setting looked like Hawaii. May Heatherly's voice came cool over the speaker.

"Walter Hand, former United States agent, also suspected as triple agent. At present poses as a highly successful Denver, Colorado, businessman. Heads his own company, Pikes Peak Engineering Company. This is known to be only a cover for his real activity as head of western United States branch of THRUSH. Is not on the THRUSH

council, but has been mentioned for that promotion many times. Always opposed by Manfred Burton, and by Augustus Bartz."

When the cool female voice stopped, Waverly nodded. "As you know, gentlemen, it is considered poor form in THRUSH for one unit to operate in another unit's territory without full permission. I doubt if Hand could get Burton's permission at this point. Therefore, if one of those groups were Hand's men, they were operating on their own. Which might account for their nervousness."

"What about the woman?" Solo asked.

Waverly nodded. "Miss Heatherly? The file on Lilli Kessler, please."

A picture of the petite blonde flashed onto the screen. Then more pictures flashed. They showed the elegant *chanteuse* singing in the supper clubs of many cities. There were shots of her in most of the major cities. She was pictured posing with generals of most countries, including both Nazi and Russian generals.

"Miss Kessler has always appeared to have quite broad taste," Waverly said drily. "Claims to know nothing about politics. Which is hard to accept, given her history. She was born in Vienna, usual modest circumstances, a rather impoverished family of some social standing. She first went on the stage in Vienna, learned her English by listening to records in her dressing room. She soon was singing in the best places in German, French and English. She came here and sang with some of the better known band leaders.

"Since then she has traveled a great deal, to almost every country of the world. She maintains a permanent home in Zurich, but she is rarely there. In addition to her singing, she has acted in the West End in London, and on Broadway. She has made a lot of recordings and radio appearance, but, strangely, very few on television."

"Perhaps she doesn't care to be seen by so many people," Illya said.

"Perhaps," Waverly said. "In any event, she is a cultured, elegant woman, who has a following on every continent. She travels very much. She moves in both the best and the highest circles."

"A perfect front for a courier," Solo said.

"Yes," Waverly nodded. "The thought had occurred to me. You see, in addition to all her other attributes, she has had many close male friends. One of them has long been reputed to be Manfred Burton. She has been seen many places with Burton. On his infrequent trips to Europe, Bartz did not send him often; he was usually seen with the Kessler woman."

"Doesn't that clinch it?" Solo asked.

Waverly shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not. THRUSH leaders

know many people who are not involved in their activities. So far, we have had little evidence against the Kessler woman. She is most circumspect."

"Little evidence?" Illya asked. "Then there is some?"

"Only inferentially, Mr. Kuryakin. To date, as close as our records tell us, six men have been killed in clubs where she was working."

"Coincidence?" Solo said.

"Very possibly, Mr. Solo. Miss Kessler has worked in hundreds of clubs. I—"

The three men all tensed. Alarms had begun to ring all through the building. Feet pounded outside in the halls. The automatic steel safety panels slid down over the doors and windows. Solo and Illya had their U.N.C.L.E. Specials out. Waverly flicked switches on his telescreen console. In the reception room there was a scene of deadly pandemonium. The receptionist, her gun out, and four security guards, also with their guns out, were surrounding something or someone. Waverly flicked a switch.

"Bring the person to my office! Report at once!"

A voice came from security control. "All secure, sir. One intruder in custody."

The steel panels slid soundlessly back out of the way. Solo and Illya did not put their weapons away yet. Waverly sat calmly watching his door. The door slid open. Four guards stepped through. They had their guns out and pointing at their prisoner. The prisoner was Lilli Kessler!

The petite blonde smiled. "I think you want my help, *lieblings,* yes?"

ACT II
SING OUT, SWEET THRUSH

THE SMALL, elegant blonde still smiled at them all. She looked at the Specials and raised an eyebrow. She was wearing a green silk suit and magnificent jewelry. She seemed not the least disturbed by all the chaos she had caused.

"May I?" Lilli said, indicating a chair.

"Please do," Waverly said in his most courtly voice.

She sat and crossed her slim legs. One leg swung lightly as she smiled at them all, especially at Solo. She seemed to see Solo for the first time. Her eyes widened and she looked the handsome chief agent up and down with appreciation. Alexander Waverly cleared his throat.

"Harumph! Now," Waverly said to the senior security man who was still there, "may I ask exactly what Miss Kessler is doing here, and how she reached the reception room?"

"I jiggled the little hook, *cheri,*" Lilli said.

The senior security man flushed scarlet. "It seems that this lady

gave Del Floria the correct sign and went into the dressing room. She worked the secret lever. Of course, as soon as the door opened all the alarms went, she did not have any of the recognition identification. We stopped her in the reception room. There was no trouble."

"No," Waverly said drily. "Very well; you may go. Tell Del Floria I would like to speak with him later."

"Yes sir," the senior security man said. He angrily waved his men out of Waverly's office. The senior security man could see trouble coming. The entire recognition sign system would have to be changed. It meant a lot of work for the senior security man, and that made him angry. But he left quietly, and in the small office of U.N.C.L.E.'s New York Chief, Lilli Kessler waved him good-by.

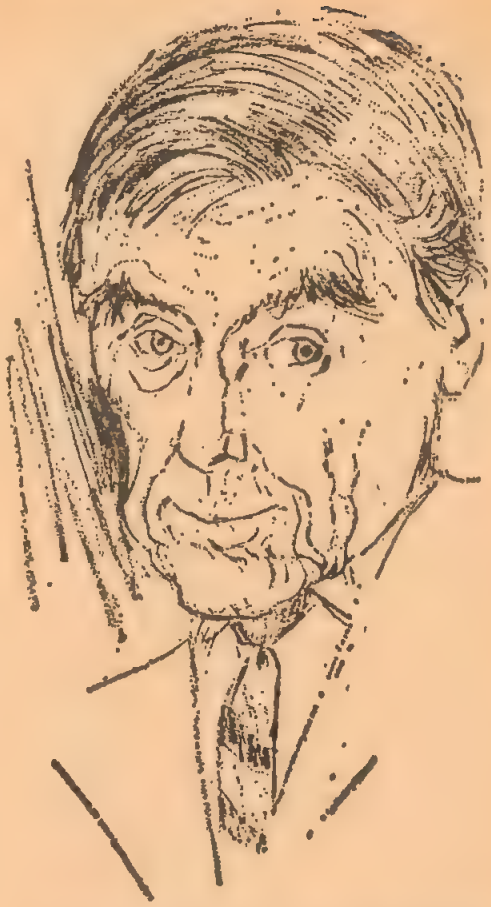
Waverly began to look for a match again, and spoke to the petite blonde as he did so.

"Very well, Miss Kessler. Perhaps you will be good enough to explain just what you are doing here, and how you learned the proper recognition signal, not to mention the location of that secret lever in the dressing room."

"I could say it was all a coincidence, yes?" the petite blonde said.

"You could say that, no," Solo said, smiling.

The woman nodded. "No, of course you are right. A friend told me? Perhaps that?"



"What friend?" Illya snapped, his enigmatic eyes studying Lilli Kessler.

"Come, come, Miss Kessler," Waverly said. "We are quite aware that the signal and the location of the lever in the proper dressing room could not have been acquired by accident."

Lilli Kessler smiled. "There, my dear Waverly, you are a little wrong. All right, I will tell all, yes? I learned those things from a friend, yes. It is true. But perhaps not as bad as you think. You see, gentlemen, I have come to help you be-

cause I am, in a way, with you. I am an agent of Interpol. I learned your little secrets in the course of many years work with U.N.C.L.E. agents in the Paris section."

"Interpol?" Illya said. "I suppose you can prove that, Miss Kessler?"

"But of course, Mr. Kuryakin," said Lilli Kessler smiled. "You see? I know much. I like you better as a blond rather than in that ridiculous waiter disguise."

"How is it that we do not have you on file as an Interpol agent, Miss Kessler?" Waverly asked quietly.

"Because we in Interpol also have our secrets. I am what is called a totally "planted" agent. I am totally undercover, and I always have been. I am known to only the highest level of Interpol. I am, of course, infiltrated into THRUSH on the courier level. Your little secrets came to me over the years from very small bits of information. Of course, THRUSH knows most of your signs, but it does them little good without the recognition identification documents. Naturally, I knew this. I expected to be stopped in the reception room."

"Why not contact us more directly?" Solo said.

Lilli raised an elegant eyebrow. "And risk discovery? Really, Mr. Solo, Interpol has spent many, many years securing my cover. I could hardly risk blowing it, could I? No, I made sure I was secure and not followed, and then came to Del Floria's. It was much the safest way to have myself brought to you, yes?"

In the silence of Waverly's small office, the three men looked at each other. Solo shrugged. Illya watched the woman and did not look convinced. Waverly was thoughtful. At last Waverly spoke.

"You, *uh,* don't mind if I check this out, do you, Miss Kessler?"

"Of course not. If I did I would not be here. I think this is the time when I must come out and do my work. THRUSH is at a vulnerable stage."

"Yes," Waverly said, "quite. If you will just talk to Mr. Kuryakin and Mr. Solo, I think I can clear this up within a few minutes."

Lilli Kessler inclined her head, and her sparkling eyes turned again toward Solo. She had a very appraising look in the eyes. The handsome agent seemed to please her, and she beamed her most alluring smile. Solo beamed back. Illya watched them both sourly.

It was an hour later before Waverly returned. The bushy-browed chief resumed his seat and now he smiled one of his rare smiles for the benefit of Lilli Kessler.

"Very well, Miss Kessler. Your story appears genuine. I must say it took considerably more time than usual. Your status is most undercover, as you said. It seems we had to reach the highest man in the

Paris office of Interpol before he could prove what you were. Let me congratulate you on the most excellent work."

Lilli Kessler became serious. "It was necessary, Mr. Waverly, believe me. Interpol has lost many agents in its work against THRUSH. Montand was only the latest. We decided many years ago that a totally planted agent, with no contact with headquarters for at least five years, was the only possible way of getting close to THRUSH.

"Only recently have I risked any contact with my people. Montand was the first man assigned to work with me."

"And he didn't last long," Solo said. "Does that mean they are on to you?"

"I don't think so, Napoleon. May I call you Napoleon? It has such an aristocratic ring," Lilli said with a smile.

"You can call me Napoleon," Solo said.

Waverly sighed. "Very nice, I'm sure, Mr. Solo. But suppose we remain with business for the time being? How *can* you be sure, Miss Kessler?"

"Simple. I had made no contact at all with Montand. The little scene you witnessed, the one that made Mr. Kuryakin so suspicious, that was Montand's way of telling me who he was. I had no chance to acknowledge the revelation. No, Montand was killed for what he was writing. And I have no idea what that was."

"Who killed him, Miss Kessler?" Illya said.

Lilli smiled. "Call me Lilli. Everyone does. Who? Why Walter Hand's men, I'm sure of that."

"How can you be sure?" Illya said.

"Because Hand is after the plans," Lilli said. "Oh yes, I know of the rocket plans. You see, my actual assignment now is Manfred Burton. We planned it all along, to have someone non-American get close to Burton. I am close to him. I know that he has the plans, on a roll of microfilm he never lets out of his secret office. You see, he trusts me. He showed me the film. It is a large roll, as microfilm goes, about the size of a thimble. The plans must be large and detailed."

Waverly nodded. "They are, which is one of the problems of transmission. The documents filled a very large file. But tell us, Miss Kessler, just why have you risked coming to U.N.C.L.E.?"

"Because I must have help. Naturally, being with THRUSH so long, I recognized Mr. Kuryakin by his name when the THRUSH man used the name. I had already noted Mr. Solo by sight."

"What kind of help?" Waverly asked.

"Let me explain. I am, as I said, very close to Manfred, but that has exposed me to Walter Hand. I am watched by Hand's men, as you

saw, Mr. Kuryakin. At the same time, Manfred is very careful with that film. He cannot transmit it; he fears to let it out of his hands for a second. He does not really trust his own people. He is waiting for a big meeting soon where Council will send a member to pick up the film. Manfred wants to deliver the film in person, of course. However, so does Walter Hand. Hand will stop at nothing, and neither will Burton. So—"

Lilli Kessler stopped, looked at them all.

"So?" Waverly said.

"So I think you must get the film. I can show you where it is, and help you in, but I do not have the tools or the skill to get it. He keeps it in a very strong safe."

Again there was a silence. Illya narrowed his shrewd eyes beneath his lowered brow, and ran his hand through his thatch of blond hair. Even Solo raised an eyebrow and looked at his companions. Waverly made a tent of his hands and pressed the tips of his fingers against his lips. His hooded eyes were considering the petite blonde singer.

"You—uh—want us to help you get the roll of microfilm, Miss Kessler?" Waverly said slowly.

Lilli Kessler shrugged her fine shoulders. "Why should you trust me that far, *hein?* No, I want to lead you to the plans so that you can have them. I do not want suspicion on me if it can be helped. I still have work to do. But I am worried that those plans will be delivered, so you must have them."

Waverly smiled. "I see. Well—"

"And I am worried," Lilli Kessler went on. "I admit it, I am worried very much about Walter Hand. I think I would like some help, some strong protection, yes?"

"That will be my pleasure," Solo said.

Lilli smiled. "Good. It is settled then. I will lead you to the safe in Burton's secret stronghold. The rest is up to you."

"When?" Illya asked.

"Tonight, I think," Lilli Kessler said. She took out a long Russian cigarette, leaned forward to Solo. "You may light me now, Napoleon dear."

TWO

NAPOLEON SOLO lurked inside the darkened doorway across the street from the dark and silent old mansion-town house in the upper east seventies. The old town house showed no light, no movement inside, no signs of life at all. An empty and innocent old building. But it was neither innocent nor empty. It was the secret stronghold of Manfred Burton.

Inside, Lilli Kessler was at work, and Solo was waiting for the signal.

Solo bent down over his radio-pencil. "Bubba, this is Sonny. Come in, Bubba."

The pencil spoke in the cool ac-

cents of Illya Kuryakin. "Bubba here. Burton is at his table. I see most of his men. And how is it there?"

Solo smiled as he pictured Illya again in the waiter's disguise at the Cafe Lieder. That was the plan: Illya to watch Burton and his men; Solo to wait to be let into the stronghold; Lilli Kessler to open an entrance from the inside, lead him to the vault where Burton kept all that was valuable. The key to the plan was time.

Lilli had explained that it was her well-known habit to relax alone in her dressing room for precisely a half an hour before her first appearance. Alone and undisturbed —she had established this in order to have time for her most secret reports to Interpol in the rare cases when she made contact.

Since Burton knew this habit, he would not miss her for that half an hour, and her maid, Helga, was one hundred percent reliable. So Solo and Lilli had one half hour to secure the films of the plans, and to get Lilli back for her first appearance. Meanwhile, Illya watched Burton and his men in the cafe just in case. Now, Solo leaned over his pencil-radio.

"All okay here. The house is quiet. How does Burton look?"

"Confident," Illya reported tersely. "Time is flying, though."

"I know," Solo said, one eye on the house. Then he saw the faint signal, a brief flash of red light from

a second floor window. "There she is. I'm going in."

"Be careful, Napoleon," Illya said from the care.

"Just watch Burton, my friend," Solo said. "Over and out."

He clicked off the pencil-radio and put the pencil into his breast pocket. He checked his U.N.C.L.E. Special, his tiny smoke bombs, his knife, and the various escape equipment concealed in his clothes. Then he left the doorway and moved as silent as a cat across the street. There would be guards, but he was out of the line of vision from the

house where he crossed the street.

Solo moved in the shadow of the buildings until he reached the old mansion. The windows on the first floor were all heavily shuttered with steel shutters. On the second floor the windows were covered with wooden shutters, but one set of shutters was now open a crack. It was the window from which the signal had come. Solo studied the facade of the building.

A drainpipe led up to the roof. It was some ten feet from the window, but a narrow ledge ran around the entire second floor beneath the windows. Solo carefully checked the street and the silent house, then moved quickly to the drainpipe and swarmed up to the second floor.

The ledge was only three inches wide. Carefully, he moved out on his toes on the ledge. He clung to the window shutters with his fingers. Between the windows there was a recess in the brick wall about head high. He clung to this and inched toward the second window. As he reached it, the shutter opened quickly outward. Solo slid inside, Lilli Kessler stood there with her finger on her lips. Solo nodded.

He watched her close the window. Then she motioned for him to follow her. He saw that they were in a bedroom. She led him across the room and out into a dim hallway. They moved along the hallway until they came to a small door. She went through the door and Solo followed. Far away somewhere he heard voices—two men talking and laughing somewhere below on the first floor.

He found that they stood in a small room filled with brooms and pails and cleaning equipment.

"This room is not wired. There are two guards downstairs. They don't remain too alert, since they rely on the shutters and the alarm system," Lilli said.

"Alarm system?" Solo said.

"I turned it off," Lilli said. "One of the advantages of being a trusted 'friend.' I learned the location of the alarm. I shall have to turn it back on immediately."

Solo nodded. "Then what?"

"The vault room. It is wired on a special internal alarm. You have the equipment to handle that?"

"I hope so," Solo said. "Only two guards?"

"They don't need more, Napoleon. Without inside help you could not have entered at all."

"Where is this vault room?"

"Behind a secret panel on the third floor. I can operate the panel, but the vault door has the alarm," Lilli said.

"All right. Go and reset the outside alarm in case they check; then take me to the vault," Solo said.

Solo waited in the small room full of cleaning equipment. He held his U.N.C.L.E. Special. Not that he did not trust Lilli, but he was a sitting duck in the small room if she wanted to betray him. Moments

later she returned. She nodded, and motioned Solo to follow her.

They went along the dim upstairs hallway and up the stairs to the third floor. Lilli led him silently along the hall of the third floor to a door in the interior of the old house. They entered and were in a kind of office. File cabinets lined the walls. There were two desks. Lilli walked to one of the file cabinets and reached behind it. Almost instantly the cabinet swung out, a panel slid up on the wall. Lilli stepped back. Solo walked close and studied the steel door facing him.

It was a strong vault, but not an unusual type. It opened by straight double combination without need of a key. Solo studies the door itself and the frame. The alarm worked, he was sure, by a broken circuit system when the door was moved from the frame. Solo began to take some equipment from his pockets.

"It shouldn't be too hard if they only have the one alarm," Solo said.

"I'm sure of that. I've had a long time to study it," Lilli said. "You can open it?"

"We'll find out, won't we?" Solo said.

He stood close to the door and went to work. First, he attached a small battery-operated electronic device to the vault door frame. He activated the device.

"For the alarm?" Lilli said.

"It just may keep the circuit closed after the door is open," Solo said.

Then he took out another small electronic device and attached it to the combination dial. Leaning close with his ear, he began to turn the dial. After a moment the electronic device gave a *beep*. Solo stopped, rubbed his fingers, and continued to turn the dial. For a time in the room there was no sound but Solo's breathing, the dial turning, and the faint *beeps* from the small device. After the eighth *beep,* Solo stepped back.

He smiled at Lilli. "Well, let's see if the alarm is taken care of."

He spun the lock wheel, and pulled.

The massive door came open.

Solo and Lilli held their breath.

Nothing happened. No alarms went. Solo smiled at the petite blonde, who smiled weakly in return and sat down at a desk, her hands shaking. Solo stepped into the vault. Lilli shook herself. She stood and joined Solo. The agent searched all the small metal drawers. At last he turned with a tiny spool of microfilm in his hands. Lilli took it eagerly and went to the desk.

At the desk she switched on a light and held the tiny strip of film in front of it. She nodded.

"This is it. It's in some kind of code, of course, but I recognize it," Lilli said.

Solo turned and closed the vault. He locked it, removed his two elec-

tronic devices, and joined Lilli at the desk. She handed him the film.

"You keep it, Napoleon. It scares me to even hold it."

Solo took the film—and froze.

The sound came from the door into the room. Solo slowly turned. Lilli covered her mouth with her hand as she stared. Three people stood in the doorway. Two were men with the special rifles of THRUSH in their hands, the ugly infra-red scope bulging on top of the rifles. The third was a woman, a beautiful woman with violet eyes who stood almost six feet tall and had all her curves in all the right places. The woman also held a gun —an ugly Luger type pistol. She smiled.

"I'll take that film, Napoleon," she said.

"Hello, Maxine," Solo said.

"The film, Napoleon," Maxine Trent said. "Thanks for getting it. U.N.C.L.E. has its uses after all."

Solo sighed and handed the tiny roll of film to the lovely THRUSH agent. Maxine smiled at Solo and Lilli Kessler.

THREE

ILLYA FINISHED serving the wine to the second table of his station, and returned to his spot against the wall. He looked at his watch. More than a half an hour had passed. Lilli Kessler had not appeared. Illya bent over his pencil-radio.

"Sonny, this is Bubba. Come in, Sonny. Bubba calling Sonny, come in, Sonny!"

There was no response.

Illya looked toward, where Manfred Burton sat at his special table. The heavy-set THRUSH leader was twirling his glass in his hands and looking into the wings of the stage. The patrons of the cafe were beginning to grow restless. A few were questioning the other waiters. Illya bent again over his pencil-radio.

"Mayday! Mayday! Come in, Sonny! Bubba calling Sonny!"

The receiver was silent.

Illya looked at his watch. Over forty-five minutes had passed now. The people in the Cafe Leider were buzzing with annoyance. The *maitre* was on the telephone, obviously calling backstage. Manfred Burton looked at his watch. The burly man was not a THRUSH leader for nothing. Almost instantly, Burton jumped to the right conclusion—that Lilli's absence had some danger for him.

Burton stood abruptly and motioned to his men. They all headed fast for the door. Illya abandoned his post and went quickly out the side way and ran up the alley to the street. He reached the small side street as soon as Burton and his men did. The burly THRUSH chief led the dash for his car. Illya did not wait to follow. He knew where they were going.

Illya jumped into his car and

drove as fast as possible straight to the old town house Lilli Kessler had identified as Burton's stronghold. He got there moments before Burton. The house was dark and silent. Illya Kuryakin dashed inside.

The outer door was open. Behind him he heard Burton's car screech to a halt. Inside, Illya saw the two sprawled guards, and heard the silence. He knew at once that someone else had raided Burton's house this night, and that that someone probably had Solo and the petite blonde chanteuse.

Illya had no time to see or think anything else. Burton and his men pounded up the stairs and into the house. Illya had just time to hide in a closet. He left the door open a crack. He watched the THRUSH men bend over the forms of their comrades. He saw Burton curse and dash up the stairs toward the upper floors. Illya took out his pencil-radio. He spoke very softly.

"Control Central, Waverly direct. Come in, Mr. Waverly."

The pencil intoned softly. "Yes, Mr. Kuryakin?"

"I am inside Burton's house. It has been raided. No sign of Solo or the Kessler woman. Burton is extremely agitated."

"Do you have any idea just who the raiders were?" Waverly's calm voice said quietly.

"No, but I can guess," Illya whispered.

There was a silence. "Yes, Walter Hand, probably. This is most serious, Mr. Kuryakin. The Kessler woman was the best lead we've had in this matter."

"Not to mention Napoleon," Illya said softly.

Waverly's voice was curt. "Mr. Solo knows the risks. But it seems to mean that the plans are lost to us. That is most unfortunate, Mr. Kuryakin. I—"

"Just a moment, sir," Illya snapped.

He saw Burton coming back down the stairs. The heavy-set THRUSH chief was in a wild fury. He waved his thick arms and cursed the two men who were just reviving. They appeared to be explaining something. Burton became even angrier. Illya bent over his radio.

"It looks like whoever raided did get Napoleon and Lilli Kessler, and

the film. Burton is in a rage. I think he is getting ready to go somewhere."

Waverly's voice was as urgent as it ever got. "You must not lose him, Mr. Kuryakin. Those plans are vital. We still want to try to destroy the effectiveness of THRUSH in North America. The Kessler woman's information is most important."

Illya watched the THRUSH men milling around outside. He could see most of the room through the crack in the door. Their voices had risen, especially Burton's voice, and Illya clearly heard the name . . . *Hand!*

"Do you have any ideas, sir?" Illya whispered.

"You'll think of some way, Mr. Kuryakin."

"Yes sir," Illya said drily. There was action out in the room. "I better sign off."

"Very well, Mr. Kuryakin, but get that film and protect that woman."

The receiver went dead. Illya clicked off. He watched through the crack he had left open. The THRUSH men were plainly getting ready to move. But how was he to follow them? As if in answer to his unspoken question, Manfred Burton turned to one of his men. Illya opened the door a little farther to hear.

"We'll need more men for this. Are the new recruits ready up at Kinston Camp?"

"Some of them, sir," the assistant said.

"Get them down here fast. Have them flown down to meet us at the airport. We'll take the private jet. He won't get away with this! I'll have his heart on a plate for raiding me!"

Illya waited until they had gone. Then he bent over his pencil-radio again.

"Central control, this is Bubba. Come in central control, transport section. Urgent!"

A cool female voice answered. "Transport section. You have a transport request, Agent Kuryakin?"

"A helicopter to East Seventy-Sixth Street, near the Park. I'll be on the roof. They will see me. Also, bring a THRUSH uniform, private soldier."

"Uniform and helicopter. Over and out," the crisp female despatcher said.

Illya left his closet and ran up the stairs. He did not stop to look at the room with the open vault. It was imperative that he reach the airport before Burton or the recruits.

On the roof he waited. A few minutes later the helicopter came down and hovered. Illya climbed into the hoisting rig and was raised. The instant Illya was inside and instructed the pilot where to go, the helicopter flew off. Illya struggled into the THRUSH black uniform.

"Land me near the private jet of Burton's. You know it?"

"I know it," the pilot said.

Less than a half an hour later Illya stood alone in his THRUSH uniform near the jet. He melted into the shadows under the giant plane. All was silent. He waited there alone for two hours. Then he saw the private DC-3 touch down. He watched the young men get out, and saw what he had hoped for—the new recruits all looked at each other with curiosity! Which meant, as he had expected from his knowledge of THRUSH training, that the recruits did not know each other well!

The recruits were marched to the jet and ordered to wait. The leader walked off to report to Burton somewhere. When the leader was out of sight, Illya sneaked into the jet and came out of it, making sure they saw where he came from. He averted his face in the night and beckoned to one recruit.

"You!"

The recruits looked at each other. The one Illya pointed to paled. Like all recruits, they were accustomed to being ordered constantly by everyone.

"Yes, you!"

The recruit gulped. "Me, sir?"

"Over here, quick!"

The recruit jumped up and marched to Illya. The others watched. Illya snapped at the recruit.

"Come with me. You're on a special assignment."

"But—" the recruit stammered.

"A man will take your place," Illya said loud enough for them all to hear.

He marched the recruit off into the night. When they were out of sight, he quietly knocked the man out, radioed U.N.C.L.E. security, Section-IV, and told them to come and pick the man up. He injected him with a sleep-dart to keep him out for some hours. Then he took his recruit papers, and returned to the group. He did not join them at once, but waited until the leader came back with Burton and his regular men. The recruits snapped to attention; no one noticed Illya slip in.

"Take their papers," Burton snapped, his eyes counting them.

Moments later, the recruits filed on board the jet with the regular men. Burton was in his private compartment. The jet took off with Illya sitting in the middle of the recruits and learning that they were going to take care of Walter Hand!

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO paced slowly around the small cell. Lilli Kessler sat against the metal wall. Solo studied the walls and the single door. They were all solid steel, and behind them was the rock of the mountain.

"Do you know where we are, Napoleon?" Lilli asked.

"I have a pretty fair idea," Solo said. "From the direction, and the

time, of that little jet ride we took with my friend Maxine, I'd say we were somewhere in Colorado. Which means in Walter Hand's headquarters."

"In the hands of Hand, yes?" Lilli said.

Solo smiled. "You have your sense of humor intact."

The petite blonde shrugged. "I am not a girl. I have seen much—the Nazis, the Russians, all of them. You learn to have a sense of humor."

Solo was only half listening as he studied the steel walls. "I suppose you do," he said abstractedly. "From the way we came in, the sounds, I'd say this is an old mine. We're in one of the shafts, all redone into a cosy headquarters and prison."

"Which means we are lost, no?"

"No," Solo said. "But it means we could be if we don't move pretty damned fast."

"Move? Out of a steel cell inside a mine?"

"Did you tell Maxine who you were?"

"Of course," Lilli said. "She laughed. Why not? I am a friend of Burton, not Hand, and they have the film. They have the film and both of us. It will be quite a coup for Walter Hand."

Solo mused. "Perhaps not. This cell is steel, not stone. And there's air from somewhere, which means there has to be space between the steel and the stone."

"*Bien,* we dig out with our fingers!" Lilli said.

Solo smiled. "Not quite. We have a running battle with out friends from THRUSH. They know all our tricks, so we invent new tricks. They searched me pretty well, but not quite good enough. See?"

Solo held his hand and carefully peeled off the fingernails! He kneaded them in his palm into a small clay-like ball. Solo showed his real fingernails still intact. Then he bent and pulled a thread from his trouser cuff. He squeezed the thread into the ball.

"Plastic heat-compound. Melts almost anything," Solo said, and looked at the door. He shook his head. "No, they'll have the door wired for an alarm. And I think the walls will take us out. Still, better be ready."

The handsome chief agent began to peel off the fingernails on his other hand. He kneaded them into a ball, pulled a thread from his tie this time, and fused this plastic ball.

"A plastic explosive," Solo explained. "So there we are. We have a way to melt the walls, and a bomb in case things get out of hand."

Solo grinned at Lilli. The petite blonde woman stared at him, and shook her head slowly. It was an admiring shake of the head.

"I see I went to the proper people. You are all very expert, and very dangerous. I think, perhaps, I should have remained no more than a singer."

"No you don't," Solo said. "Not with so much work to be done to make the world somewhere people can live."

"No, you're right, I don't. I knew what I was doing when I joined Interpol."

"Are you ready?" Solo said.

"Yes," Lilli said.

"All right. Now I'm going to melt a hole into the air duct. We'll go through and out the other end. There will be registers. I'll go first with the bomb, but you come close behind. We don't want to let them separate us, right?"

"Yes," Lilli said, nodded.

"Good, now . . ."

Solo stopped, warned Lilli to silence. There were footsteps outside the door. The footsteps stopped. The lock clicked in the door. Solo quickly shoved the two small plastic bombs into his pocket. Maxine stepped into the room with two armed guards. The tall, violet-eyed girl smiled at Solo.

"Still here, Napoleon? My, you are slipping," Maxine said.

"You've finally got me, Maxine," Solo said.

Maxine sighed. "I wish I did, but you're incorrigibly one of the good guys. Even if you could accept a bad one like me, they'd never let me have you."

"Life is tragic," Solo said.

"Isn't it? And brief, very brief."

"Is that a hint?" Solo said.

"Not yet, Napoleon. A little interrogation first. Come on."

Maxine waved them both out. Solo followed Lilli out into the corridor. It was steel-lined like the room, but it had all the aura of an old mine shaft. Maxine marched them for some way along bright corridors that hummed with the noise of the air-conditioning. Solo guessed that they were quite a distance beneath the ground, yet he could not recall having come down very far when brought in.

Obviously, then, it was an old mine, and they were deep inside a mountain, and the entrance was horizontal rather than vertical. These things were important for any escape, but beyond that, Solo could not find anything that helped. The corridors seemed all identical; there were no doors and no windows.

Still, air was coming in, and

where air came in there had to be a way out.

"In here, if you please," Maxine said.

A section of the wall slid open to form a door. This, then, was the way all the rooms were entered—no doors, simply sliding sections of wall! Walter Hand had an efficient headquarters. And in the room they entered Solo saw the fat little THRUSH chief himself.

"Ah, my dear Solo! And Mademoiselle Kessler. How charming!"

The room was probably an office—but what an office! It was an enormous room carved out of the stone of the mountain, but magnificently oak panelled, carpeted, furnished with luxurious furniture and all the comforts, including a giant private bar.

"A drink? Of course. Solo will have Scotch, I think, yes? And the beautiful lady takes, let me see, Pernod *frappe*?"

"Why not?" Lilli Kessler said.

"Good! Paul, the drinks. For everyone, ask what they want. We stand on no ceremony here," Hand said, his fat little face and body like Hollywood's idea of a cherub.

Among all the couches and carpets and elegant chairs in the office there was also a mammoth desk, files, a complete communications system, closed circuit and regular TV. Walter Hand had a complete central office. The waiter brought them drinks, and Hand waved his pudgy little hand.

"Sit down, sit down!"

Solo and Lilli sat down. Maxine and her two soldiers sat across the office, alert and ready. The waiter vanished.

Solo had the distinct impression that unseen eyes watched his every move. He was fairly sure he saw eyes peering from various small openings in the walls.

Walter Hand was almost chuckling.

"So, here we are," Hand chuckled, rubbing his hands. "My dears, what a *coup!* I have the plans we all wanted, and Burton does not! Lost them right from under his nose. I was wondering how to get them, and Maxine tells me you actually got them for her. Wonderful!"

Across the room Maxine Trent laughed. "We could never have gotten into the house if the alarms had been on. Solo and the woman had them turned off! He did all that work on the safe, too."

Hand roared, his fat face red with effort, his feet off the ground like some small boy at the circus. "What a wonderful caper! Not only the plans and Burton made to look like the fool he is, but Solo, too! You will make a wonderful gift to THRUSH, Solo! And Miss Kessler," and the small, fat man beamed at the petite blonde. "Ah, Miss Kessler will be my ace. Yes, she will. Imagine, an outsider let into Burton's secrets, and then caught betraying him with U.N.-

C.L.E. Oh, that will do Burton nicely."

The fat cherub laughted and laughed. Solo watched Hand. At least there was one good aspect: they apparently did not know yet that Lilli was an Interpol agent. Walter Hand could not stop laughing as he thought about the discomfiture of his arch-rival.

"Can you imagine?" Hand chortled. "Burton lets this outsider know his secrets, even about the rocket plans, and then she turns traitor and brings in U.N.C.L.E. And I, Walter Hand, have to save the day. The whole of North America is as good as mine, in my hand. Oh, I'd give a lot to see Manfred's face when—"

Solo saw it first in the eyes of the waiter, a kind of shock too sudden to be fear. Then he saw the sudden change in Maxine's face. The waiter and Maxine were the only two in the room facing the sliding panel door. But Walter Hand could hear, and the fat little man proved to Solo that he was both quick and deadly as his reputation said he was. The faint sound of the panel opening made his reach like lighting for his gun, stand, and turn ready to fire. But he did not fire.

Manfred Burton stood there with ten men, all armed. The burly THRUSH chief did not smile.

"All right, Walter. Now you see Manfred's face. What are you going to give?"

FIVE

HAND AND BURTON faced each other in the suddenly death-like silence like two vicious fighting cocks, each afraid to make the first move and perhaps expose himself. Solo watched them all carefully. He motioned Lilli behind him.

Hand and Burton each held a pistol. They had each other covered. Maxine and her men were to the right of Hand, all with their weapons ready. Ranged behind Burton were his ten men, all armed and ready, most covering Hand and his people, but two covering the door. They all remained that way for a long two minutes. Then Walter Hand chuckled.

"Well, Manfred, it looks like a standoff."

"I out-number you eleven to four," Burton said. "I have the corridors and your men outside."

"True, my dear Manfred, but I have you covered, and you know that I will shoot before they can shoot me. You also know that I am an excellent shot."

"So am I, Walter," Burton said.

"Ah, yes, but I also have all of you covered by my men in the walls. I'm sure you know that," Hand said.

Burton looked at the walls. He smiled for the first time. Both Burton's and Hand's smiles were as cold, as phony as death masks.

"So, it is a standoff then," Burton said.

Walter Hand shrugged. "Let's not be foolish about this, Manfred. Neither of us can trust the other for a second. No, we will have to think of something else. After all, I have the film of the plans."

"True, but I have you for sure," Burton said.

"Perhaps," Hand said. "Tell me, how did you do it? Get in here, I mean."

"Bribery, Walter. How else? Your men can be bribed, it seems. A bad mark against you."

"Ah, but you trusted Miss Kessler; a bad mark against you!"

Solo sat there and listened to them, but he was thinking fast. If there was to be a way out it had to come now. They had not searched him again. He still had his thermite bomb and his plastic explosive bomb. Still, it would be a desperate chance.

He looked all around the room. The two leaders were still fencing, trying to find a basis for negotiation, some way they could put down their arms and trust each other long enough to work something out which might do it.

Solo knew that Burton's men were watching Hand and his men, and that Hand's men behind the walls were watching Burton and his men. Even Maxine was watching Burton. For the moment no one was watching Lilli and Solo—except one man. One of Burton's intruders was watching Solo very carefully. Solo looked at him, and

looked casually away—it was Illya!

Illya wearing a THRUSH uniform!

Solo touched Lilli, who was seated half behind him. The petite blonde looked to where Solo nodded. She saw Illya. Solo was worried—Maxine knew Illya on sight, and the small Russian was not in disguise. Solo signaled that he was going to make an attempt. Illya nodded and imperceptibly began to back away to cover Solo and Lilli. Solo stood and pulled Lilli up. The chief agent began to circle slowly toward the door.

Solo moved warily, carefully, stopping every few seconds so as not to have his motion attract attention. After a few minutes he was two-thirds of the way to the door. Then he froze. Illya was at the door, waiting.

But Lilli Kessler was not behind Solo.

Solo turned slowly to look back. Lilli was still standing just where he had left her. Now, as Solo looked, Lilli smiled and suddenly spoke.

"Gentlemen, perhaps I can arbitrate. The guards can remain here, still armed. Manfred and Mr. Hand can put up their own guns and go to some definitely neutral spot to talk."

Manfred Burton stared at the petite blonde. "You! After what you have done to—"

Lilli smiled. "Done? What have I done? No one has bothered to ask me. I was captured by Mr. Solo and forced to take him to your headquarters, Manfred. I am not a brave woman. I do not want to die. What could I do?"

Walter Hand laughed, his fat face shaking. "Come, come, dear lady! Are we expected to believe that? How could he force you to release the alarms from inside?"

"U.N.C.L.E. has ways, Mr. Hand, as I'm sure you know. As a matter of fact he used an explosive implant! It was set to a radio frequency Solo had. What could I do? And if you want proof, just look at the door, both of you, and you will see another U.N.C.L.E. agent! They wanted me to escape with them. Instead, I give them both to you!"

Solo had anticipated the sudden switch an instant before it happened. He made a dive for the nearest THRUSH man, knocked him down, and leaped for the door. Maxine Trent was the only one who reacted as fast. The beautiful woman with the violet eyes fired at Illya. Illya fired back. Maxine took cover. Solo threw his bomb. The explosion shook the room, but his aim had been off in his haste and only two THRUSH privates fell.

Illya and Solo were through the sliding door and racing down the corridor. Illya led the way. The small Russian had come in with Burton and knew the way out. They ran along corridors until they came

to a turn. Illya led the way around the turn—and stopped.

A panel had come down across the corridor.

Solo and Illya turned.

Another panel slid across the corridor.

A white gas began to hiss from the walls.

Solo took out his thermite bomb and stuck it to one of the panels. He pulled the fuse. The heat bomb flared up.

The gas filled the small space where they were trapped.

Before the thermite could burn a hole, Solo and Illya fell unconscious to the steel floor.

ACT III
EVEN VULTURES ARE BIRDS

THE FIRST THING Illya Kuryakin saw when he opened his eyes was the face of Napoleon Solo.

Solo blinked as he looked at Illya. Solo tried to move. He could not move. He watched Illya. He could see nothing holding Illya, and yet he knew that Illya, too, could not move. They had used their paralysis formula.

Illya moved his eyeballs to indicate that he, too, had thought the same thing. They were seated facing each other in a dark room on some kind of steel floor. Solo saw that Illya was wearing some kind of coveralls. Solo remembered that the drug did not stop speech.

"We can talk," Solo said.

"You look ridiculous, Napoleon," Illya said.

"I'm wearing coveralls?"

"Two sizes too big."

"What do you think you're wearing?" Solo said.

"They stripped us of everything this time," Illya said.

"Our friend Lilli," Solo said.

"Your friend," Illya said. "I never trusted her."

"Be positive," Solo said. "Think of something."

"It may take a minute," Illya said.

"Perhaps two," Solo said. "You know, I'd say it looks bad this time."

"I tend to agree, Napoleon," Illya said. "Did they get it all?"

Solo moved his tongue. He felt the tooth, the special false tooth that contained a tiny smoke bomb. "No, I have the tooth."

"And I have my scar," Illya said soberly.

The last resort for many U.C.-C.L.E. agents was a long, thin scar on the leg somewhere. Under the scar, implanted there as an absolute final resort, was a thin six-inch long needle blade. Illya was one of the agents who carried this last resort weapon. Solo tried to nod, could not move his neck.

"Now if we could only move," Solo said.

"We'd still be locked up. We don't have any escape tools, and this is not a wooden railway carriage," Illya said.

"You have no optimism," Solo said.

"I—"

Illya stopped. His eyes blinked a warning. Both men held their breath. The faint noise came again. A tiny scraping sound. Then, as if by some black magic, the door to their cell opened. A voice whispered.

"Be very silent, *lieblings*!"

The elegant blonde head of Lilli Kessler appeared in the dim doorway. The petite *chanteuse* came silently into the room. She carried a small black case—and a pistol. She closed the cell door behind her and listened. Solo and Illya watched her. Solo spoke first.

"We have a friend, Illya."

"I wonder what she's selling this time, Napoleon," Illya said.

"Probably the Chinese water torture," Solo said.

Lilli came closer. She knelt down on the steel floor and looked at them. She sighed aloud.

"I see I shall have trouble with you, yes? You don't trust me?"

"We don't trust you, no," Solo said.

"For myself, I never did," Illya said.

Lilli touched her heart. "I am desolate! Such lack of trust is shocking. Why would I be here?"

"You'll think of a reason," Illya said.

Now Lilli swore. "All right, you fools; enough of this joking. We have very little time. I will be missed, and so will this drug that releases you. I'm afraid I had to kill the doctor to get it."

She had opened the black case and showed two hypodermic syringes. She raised her skirt and took two more pistols from her stocking tops. Then she looked at the two U.N.C.L.E. agents.

"Well, boys, do you trust me?" Lilli said. "We have no time for games."

"Why did you turn us in?" Solo said.

Lilli Kessler nodded. "A good question. I had to think fast. I admit it was a risk; they might well have killed you on the spot, but I counted on both of them wanting to hand you over to the council. You see, they are each so very anxious to be the boss in all of North America. It has clouded their normally excellent judgment. Everything they do now is a desperate attempt to beat the other out of the top job. They are like madmen."

"You still haven't said why you turned us in?" Illya said.

Lilli shrugged. "Because I was sure you could not make it. I had to use my own wits. I decided you could not escape. There was no time for debate, especially after I saw that Maxine had seen Solo moving."

"Maxine saw me?" Solo said.

"Did you not notice how quickly she shot?" Lilli said. "Of course you did. Well, when I saw her be-

come aware, I had to act fast. It was clear to me that by pointing out Mr. Kuryakin I might regain my status with Burton, and it would be far better to have only two of us in a cell. Once I was trusted again, I could do what I am doing. You see?"

Solo looked at Illya. Illya would have shrugged if he could have moved a muscle. As it was he rolled his eyeballs.

"Do we trust her?" Solo said.

"Do we have a choice?" Illya said.

"No," Solo said.

"Then we trust her," Illya said.

Lilli threw up her hands. "Such logic! Magnificent!"

"Are you going to talk all night?" Illya said.

Lilli laughed. She took one of the hypodermic needles from the black case and injected it into Illya's arm. She grinned at Solo.

"I like to see you helpless, Napoleon. It is a wonderful sight for a woman to see such a strong, handsome man totally helpless. That is what all women really want, you know. A totally weak and helpless man."

"I'm sure it must be fun," Solo said, "but get me out."

Lilli laughed again, and took out the second hypodermic. She injected Solo. Illya was already moving: first his head, then his hands. Finally he stood up. His legs wobbled and he almost fell, but he steadied himself and began to walk, jump, squat to revive the muscles. After a time Solo joined him. Lille Kessler watched them both.

Illya Kuryakin turned to her.

"How did you manage to get clear of them?" Illya said.

Lilli shrugged. "It was really simple. They are trying to work it out. They took my suggestion, and went alone to some room. It is, of course, a stalemate. I imagine they will try to work together now, but that could be fatal. THRUSH minions do not cooperate well. They are so busy they more-or-less forgot about me. I managed to get to the laboratory and take the antidote. I had to kill the doctor. I stole the guns at the same time."

Lilli looked at both men. "I know a way out, but it is not easy. It will take all our strength and ability. Also, I think that Maxine Trent still does not trust me. She will miss me soon if she has not already. I think we should move with speed, yes?"

"Yes," Solo said.

"All right, lead," Illya said.

The two men took the guns, and the three of them moved to the door. Illya and Solo looked down at a sprawled guard. He was quite dead, a thin steel wire around his throat. Illya looked at Lilli with considerable respect. The woman looked at the body of the guard she had killed, and then looked away.

"Come," the petite blonde said.

She led them along the silent cor-

ridor in the direction away from the entrance. They moved down many silent corridors. They saw no one. Then Lilli stopped. She pressed them back against the corridor wall.

Two black-uniformed guards were coming down the corridor.

TWO

THE GUARDS came on, talking to each other.

"They will see us," Lilli whispered. "But to shoot will ruin everything!"

Illya bent and tore at his leg. There was blood. He drew out his long, needle-like blade. Solo reached into his mouth for the tiny smoke bomb false tooth. The two guards were close. They looked up and saw. Solo threw his bomb. Smoke billowed up. Illya leaped through the smoke. There were two sharp grunts and a low, faint scream that died as the man died.

The two guards lay on the floor of the corridor as the smoke cleared.

"Good," Lilli said. "Come on. It is not far now."

The two agents followed the petite blonde. A few moments later they stood in front of a small steel door. Lilli Kessler produced the key.

"Interpol trains us in a lot of things," the petite blonde said. "Including how to pick a pocket."

She opened the small door and the three of them ducked inside. Solo and Illya found themselves in a low, narrow passage with stone walls and old timber shoring holding up the ceiling. The passage faded off into a murky blackness. The timbers were very old, almost rotten.

"One of the old mine shafts," Lilli said. "The mountain is honeycombed with them. They've been abandoned a long time."

"It looks like a sneeze would bring them down," Solo said.

"There isn't any other way out," Lilli said. "I'm not even sure we

can make it, but there is no other way."

"Do you know where to go?" Illya asked.

"Yes, I saw the old map, and I memorized it as far as I could. After that we'll have to use our judgment."

"Come on," Solo said, "and don't sneeze."

They moved slowly and carefully along the dark shaft, their way lighted only by a tiny flashlight Lilli produced. The old timbers shivered and creaked as they passed from the light force of their steps. Dust and rotted wood dust showered down. They picked their way to avoid touching any of the ancient timber shoring. The first passage led for a quarter of a mile through the bowels of the mountain. Then they came to a cross passage.

"Left," Lilli said.

They turned left and moved slowly on. They went like this through many passages, all dark and shored by rotted old timbers. Once Solo brushed a support and it gave way with a rotted crash. The whole tunnel caved in behind them for a distance of fifty feet. Then the shuddering stopped, the dust began to settle, and the rest of the shaft held.

"At least we can't go back now," Solo said.

"You always see the bright side," Illya said.

They moved on until they reached a spot where four tunnels branched. Lilli stopped.

"This is as far as the map went that I recall. It's up to you men now," the petite blonde said.

The two men looked at the four tunnels. Solo grinned at Illya. The Russian U.N.C.L.E. agent studied one tunnel after another.

"Any ideas?" Solo said.

"One," Illya said. "I read it in a boy scout book."

The Kuryakin wet his finger and stood just inside each tunnel mouth. He did this twice, wetting his finger before each tunnel, holding the finger up. He turned to Solo.

"You try it, Napoleon."

Solo repeated the operation. Then he pointed to the third tunnel from the right.

"That one has more air movement," Solo said.

"That what I think. Let's go," Illya said.

They went into and along the tunnel. They repeated the same operation three more times at multiple tunnels. It had been a very large mine. Then Illya stopped, sniffed, felt the air.

"It's stronger," Kuryakin said.

Solo nodded. "I can feel air moving now."

They moved on with more confidence and came upon the rusted rails of a narrow car track.

"It has to lead out," Solo said.

They gripped their pistols more tightly and moved with greater caution. At last Lilli pointed ahead.

The air had become strong, sucked into the mine shafts. Ahead there was a faint greyess. Light. They inched carefully toward the greyness. They came around a corner, and ahead there was a round circle of light with the rusted tracks leading straight to the opening.

The light was not very bright, merely a circle of pale grey. Solo led the way. They reached the opening and saw the reason for the feeble light. They were lucky. The opening was heavily overgrown. Illya and Solo parted the bushes carefully and peered out.

The entrance to the old mine was in the side of the mountain on a wide, flat shoulder of the mountain. The flat area had been turned into an airfield. All around the peaks of the Rockies towered. The entrance to Hand's stronghold was a two-story office building at the edge of the landing field. The building was the main office of his company: Pikes Peak Engineering Company.

"Look, Napoleon!" Illya whispered.

Kuryakin pointed out across the air field. A large four-engined jet-bomber stood on the runway. Even as the two U.N.C.L.E. agents watched, the ground crew completed the work of refueling the jet. Beyond the big jet-bomber there were other hangers.

"What are we waiting for?" Solo said.

The alarm went that instant. A loud, wailing alarm that rolled all across the air field and echoed from the mountains. It seemed to come from far below, and from the distant building of Pikes Peak Engineering Company at the same time.

"They have discovered our escape!" Lilli said.

"Then what *are* we waiting for?" Illya said.

The three came out of the bushes that covered the mouth of the old mine shaft. The jet was about a hundred yards away. There seemed to be no one around it. Far across the field men were milling near the big low building that camouflaged the entrance to the secret stronghold of Walter Hand.

Solo, Illya and Lilli Kessler walked casually but as fast as possible toward the jet. The air field was completely open and exposed, and they felt naked people as they walked on toward the silent jet. Guard vehicles were fanning out from the main building. Solo, Illya and Lilli reached the jet.

A figure appeared in the doorway of the jet. The black figure had a rifle.

"Who the hell—"

It was a mistake. Illya shot the man out of the door. Illya stood under the door, his back bent. Solo vaulted onto his back and up through the door. There were two shots inside the jet. Solo appeared at the door.

"He was first, but I was best.

There were only the two men, Lilli!"

Illya bent again. The blonde climbed onto Illya's back. Solo reached down and hoisted her up and into the jet. Then he reached down for Illya. The nimble Kuryakin held Solo's hand, jacknifed, and swung in the door.

Inside the jet, Solo went forward to the controls.

Lilli looked out through the side window.

"They've heard the shots, I think," the girl said quietly.

Illya looked out. Vehicles were racing from the low main building. Men were running far behind the vehicles. Forward, Solo worked on the controls. Illya looked around the interior of the jet. Then his eyes flashed. It was a bomber—and it was fully armed! Machine-guns and small cannon were fixed on the gun mounts. Illya ran to the nearest machine-gun mount, cocked the gun, and peered toward the racing vehicles that were already shooting.

The engines whined and coughed into life.

Bullets slammed into the big jet. Illya opened fire. One of the vehicles was hit instantly and slewed madly across the field to overturn and burst into flame. The others came on. Illya fired at them. The big jet began to move. Solo taxied it slowly for a hundred yards, while Illya continued to hold off the pursuers. Then he gunned the engines into full life and the big jet roared down the runway. Moments later it was off, climbing steeply, the wheels up.

On the ground the pursuers stood staring up at the big jet as it climbed out of range. Illya stopped firing.

THREE

THE BIG JET bomber cruised high as Napoleon Solo checked his bearings. The mountains were all around them below. Far off to the left was the city of Denver spread out in the afternoon sun. Solo banked sharply, and turned the giant aircraft toward the east. The tanks were full of fuel; the jet was cruising smoothly.

Ten minutes later Illya saw the fighters.

"Bandits, ten o'clock high!" Illya shouted.

Solo, at the controls looked out and up. Three jet fighters were dropping down out of the sun. They looked like old Air-Force Sabre jets. They had no markings. They made a pass over the big bomber, and the leader waggled his wings in a signal for the big jet to turn and go down. Solo made a sharp turn and began to evade.

"THRUSH?" Illya called.

"Looks like it!" Solo called back. "Can you handle them?"

"I can try," Illya shouted.

"So can I," Lilli Kessler said. The petite blonde took position at a cannon mount. She smiled at Illya. "I told you that Interpol taught

me many strange skills, my little Russian."

In the air the gun mounts were completely motorized and electronically controlled. Illya Kuryakin sat at his machine-gun mount. Lilly took her place in the seat of the cannon mount. At the controls, Solo checked the rocket firing controls. They showed that the jet had no rockets in position.

"No missiles!" Solo called.

"They won't have any either," Illya said.

"Here they come, gentlemen!" Lilli cried out.

The three jet fighters had turned and made their second approach firing. They came again out of the sun, the pilots showing considerable experience. They were not armed with missiles, only with cannon and machine-guns. They were also not that experienced. In their first pass they hit nothing. Neither did Illya or Lilli.

The third pass began from below. The pilots in the jet had no stomach for too much opposition. On this pass two cannon shells struck the big jet but at no vital place. Illya tracked one past. Five hundred feet from the big jet the fighter-jet exploded. The seat ejected but the pilot sat slumped and dead as his chute opened and he drifted down.

The jets made one more attack. They hit nothing in their haste. Lilli knocked one out of the sky with a burst of her cannon. The pilot ejected safely and floated slowly down. The single remaining jet turned and escaped.

"Interpol taught you well," Illya said to the petite blonde singer.

"They are very thorough," Lilli said.

Solo tested to be sure that the big jet was unharmed. It was. They flew on toward the east at six hundred miles an hour. Illya came and sat in the co-pilot's seat beside Solo.

"They'll try again. At least once," Illya said.

"Yes," Solo said. "I'll try to bring it down somewhere they won't expect."

Solo finally brought the jet down at the abandoned military airport on Long Island. The three of them escaped from the jet unseen. But THRUSH tried again.

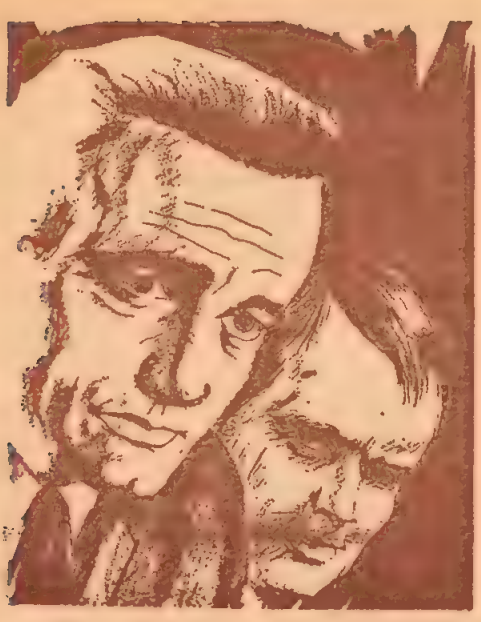
FOUR

SOLO AND ILLYA knew the instant the car they had 'borrowed' reached the street of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters that something was wrong. A silent car was parked directly across the street from Del Floria Cleaning & Tailoring shop. A pair of lovers stood in the streetlight, talking and kissing. Two drunks slumped against a building on this side of Del Floria's.

"Drive on," Illya said. "But slow and let them see us."

"Get down, Lilli," Solo said from behind the wheel.

The blonde got down. Solo drove



slowly so that he and Illya were clearly visible. As they passed under the light of the street lamp, the lovers jumped apart. Pistols appeared in their hands. Solo jammed down the accelerator and the car jumped forward. He reached the corner, and skidded around on two wheels.

Behind them, the two lovers and the two drunks ran for the parked car. Illya Kuryakin looked back.

"Let them see us, Napoleon."

"Right. Plan nine?"

"Plan Nine," Illya said.

When the other car came roaring around the corner, Solo drove away again at full speed. He led the car a chase, carefully heading for a specific street.

"Now!" Solo said sharply.

"Hang on, Lilli!" Illya said.

Solo suddenly pushed the gas pedal all the way to the floor as he rounded a corner. The car shot ahead. Solo jammed on the brakes. The three of them jumped out. Illya and Solo led the way to an alley. The other car came around the corner just in time to see the three enter the alley. It screeched to a halt, slewed across the street, and came to a stop near the mouth of the alley. All five jumped out with their guns drawn and ran into the alley after Solo, Illya and Lilli.

In the alley, the three reached a high wall. They stopped long enough to fire a round at their pursuers. Then they vanished into the wall.

The five THRUSH agents ran to the wall. They looked at each other. They never saw the silent men who came out of the buildings on both sides through doors as secret as the door in the wall.

The sounds that filled the alley now were low and soft, like the sound of a sharp spit, the *pfft, pfft* of escaping air.

Three of the five THRUSH agents fell without knowing what had hit them. One managed to turn and see the silent men before the dart struck him in the neck and he collapsed to the stones of the alley. The fifth got off a shot. The shot went wild into the night. The last THRUSH agent fell and lay still.

The men of U.N.C.L.E. Section-IV (Security and Communications) gathered around the fallen THRUSH agents. They swiftly

picked them up and carried them into the buildings. The THRUSH men were not dead, only drugged by the sleep darts. There would be long sessions of questioning.

Moments later the alley was as peaceful as it had been.

ALEXANDER WAVERLY looked up as Solo, Illya and Lilli Kessler came into his office. There were those in U.N.C.L.E. who swore that the chief never slept. He always seemed to be there. Waverly himself could have explained that his years of espionage work had trained him to sleep in catnaps whenever there was time. But Waverly never explained anything. Now he filled his pipe and nodded as his two agents and the woman singer sat down.

"So you escaped," the bushy-browed Section-I member said. "Good, even though you had to use Plan Nine. Incidentally, we will get nothing from those five. Typical THRUSH agents. No fingerprints, no papers, no knowledge of anything beyond their immediate assignment."

"The jet?" Illya said.

Waverly looked for a match. "Nothing there either. We did learn one small fact: the THRUSH agents you led into the Plan Nine trap were from some foreign unit. They were neither Hand nor Burton's men. Which means that THRUSH is getting tired of the flim-flam over here."

"It could shake up the entire North American operation," Illya said eagerly.

"Precisely," Waverly said, locating a match. "It seems that part of our plan is working. The problem is that one or both of them still has the rocket plans. That could re-instate them. It was unfortunate that you had to leave so hastily from Hand's stronghold."

"We didn't have much choice," Solo said.

Waverly lighted his pipe. "No, I suppose not. Well, what do we do now?"

Lilli Kessler smiled. "We go back and get the plans. What else?"

Waverly held his match suspended in the air as they all looked at the petite blonde singer. He returned to lighting his pipe. When he had the pipe going well, he blew smoke into the air of the quiet office.

"Just how do we go about it, Miss Kessler?" Waverly said.

"Simple," Lilli said. "The meeting with THRUSH council will be held in a few days at San Francisco. I heard them say that while I was in Walter Hand's stronghold."

"Go on," Waverly said.

"Well, we must go to San Francisco and be at that meeting!"

Waverly smiled. Illya and Solo looked at each other. Solo leaned forward and patted the knee of the petite blonde. He smiled soothingly.

"Lilli, we don't know where the

meeting will be held. We aren't likely to get an invitation," Solo said.

"I suppose we could stake out San Francisco," Illya said, looking at Waverly. "At least we know the city. We could watch for Hand and Burton, and trail them."

Waverly nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I imagine we could. But it would be a risky business. We'd need all the men we could muster. Even then, Burton and Hand are unlikely to come walking openly now that you two have escaped."

"Especially now that Lilli has escaped," Solo said.

The petite blonde snorted. "What then, *lieblings,* do we give it up? Do we say, *pfft*! there is no chance?"

Waverly considered the blonde singer. "You sound like a woman with an idea, Miss Kessler."

"Of course I have an idea!"

"Very well, enlighten us," Waverly said mildly, blowing smoke into the quiet room.

"It is so simple! I have embarrassed them, yes? They will want me more than they want Solo or Kuryakin. Particularly will Burton want me now; I am a black mark against him. In THRUSH results count."

"True," Solo said. "So what do you have in mind, Lilli?"

The tiny blonde shrugged. "I am, as it happens, booked into San Francisco as my next engagement. So I keep my engagement. It does not seem strange, yes? They will find me. When they do, and they take me with them, Napoleon and Illya will follow."

There was a silence. Solo did not look happy. Illya and Waverly were thinking. Waverly shook his head.

"It is awful risky, Miss Kessler," Waverly said. "Besides, they might not bother with you at all."

"Perhaps not," Lilli said, "but I think they will for this!"

She held up a thickly folded piece of paper. She unfolded it and showed that it was a list of names. She smiled.

"When I borrowed the antidote and the key, I also borrowed this list. It is what I have been after—a list of THRUSH couriers in this country."

Waverly stared at the list. "They will know you have given it to us."

"They will not be sure," Lilli said. "Especially if nothing happens to their couriers for some days, and if they learn that I am Interpol, which I think they will by now. THRUSH, too, has its ways of learning such things when they know what they want."

Illya Kuryakin shook his head. "They will suspect a trap."

"Why?" Lilli said. "What reason could they think of to account for U.N.C.L.E. not using the list? To make them think I had not given it to U.N.C.L.E.? All right, why? I mean, what does U.N.C.L.E. gain by making THRUSH think I did not hand over the list? What do you

gain by exposing me to danger? They won't imagine that it is simply to find where the meeting is."

Illya leaned forward. He watched the woman. Then he looked at Waverly. "She's right, you know. THRUSH would be wary, but they couldn't really suspect. It would be much more logical for them to think Lilli is holding out on us. It would be impossible for them not to take the chance that Lilli did not turn it over. They almost have to find out by contacting her."

Waverly puffed on his pipe. "It may be the only way."

Solo protested. "But the danger! They might kill her right on the stage."

"No, I know them too well. Burton will want to deliver me," Lilli said.

"You're sure, Miss Kessler, that you want to do this? You don't have to. As Mr. Solo says, there is great danger," Waverly said.

"Can you get the plans otherwise?"

"It would possibly be the best chance," Waverly said.

"Then, *voila*, it is done!" and Lilli smiled. "Anyway, I will have the two strong men protecting me, yes?"

"We could only protect you up to a point, Lilli," Solo said. "After you go out of that club with them, we can't do much."

"It will be enough that you can protect me in the club," Lilli said. Again she smiled. "Once I am with them, I can handle them myself."

"Yes," Waverly said, "I'm sure you can. Well, then, I think we are forced to accept your offer, Miss Kessler. We will, of course, equip you with various homing devices. There is a certain danger of discovery, but less, I think, than if Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin lost you."

"I agree. I will be sure they do not find the devices. You have good ones, I trust?"

Waverly smiled. "I believe we do."

"And I can hide them," Lilli said. "I do not dress so well, or wear so much jewelry for nothing."

"No," Waverly said. "Well, then, I suggest we all get to work. If you will be so kind as to come with me to our laboratory, Miss Kessler, I think we can start fitting you out. In the meantime Mr. Solo can arrange for the transportation, and Mr. Kuryakin can begin to study the layout of the club you will sing in. What is the club?"

"The Barbary Parrot," Lilli said. "Such names they have!"

"Good," Waverly said. "Perhaps we will get that film, and do a little damage to THRUSH in North America after all."

"I hope to do a great deal," Lilli said.

"Yes," Waverly said.

The chief led the petite blonde from the room toward the laboratory. Napoleon Solo went to transport section. Illya Kuryakin con-

tacted files to get a complete floor plan and detailed description of The Barbary Parrot.

FIVE

THE BARBARY PARROT was a cellar nightclub on the edge of North Beach. It was one of the newer clubs that had grown up with the glamorization of the beach. Lilli Kessler's picture was prominent outside. The petite blonde was an attraction wherever she went, and San Francisco was no exception. People went down the stairs noisily, excited by her return to the city on the Bay.

Inside, the club was a large room with brick walls, bare brick. The bar was to the left as you came in, and if anyone had noticed they would have seen a handsome young man there every night when Lilli Kessler sang. He looked like one of the hundreds of rising young executives that frequented such clubs in San Francisco, proud of their city and jealous of New York.

If anyone had really watched, they would have seen the young man leave his seat every time Lilli Kessler left the stage. Unseen by anyone, the young man, who was Napoleon Solo, took up a position in a broom closet whenever Lilli was in her dressing room.

From the closet he could see the door of her dressing room, and the stage door.

When Lilli was on stage, another man could be observed, if someone had had X-ray eyes, watching the entire room from a hidden vantage point behind the brick wall at the rear of the stage. A small hole had been cut in the wall. Illya sat on a ladder with his U.N.C.L.E. Special in his hands the whole time Lilli was performing.

For two days the people entered noisely, and sat in silence. There was a magic in the presence of the petite blonde *diseuse* on the stage, on any stage. There was a spell in her movements, the small motions of her eloquent hands, the way she leaned on the piano and sang to each single person in the crowded room as if they were alone in some silent and dim room at the farthest edges of the world.

There was more than magic in the smoky voice. No matter what the language, or whether they could understand her or not, they felt that the throaty voice, the soft lyrics, were for them alone. Sometimes she closed her eyes and sang to the dim light itself, and in the audience they closed their eyes and went with her. Few noises broke the spell, and many even forgot to drink.

Two men on the second night neither shut their eyes nor forgot to drink. Solo had seen them the instant they entered. They did not come in eagerly and with noise. They came in silence and sat in silence, but they did not listen to the smoky songs of the far-off cities

of the world, not were they under any spell. They carried small black cases, and they watched Lilli Kessler.

Solo watched them. But the two men did nothing all through her singing. They did nothing during her first intermission. They did nothing all during her second stint at the piano. At the end of the second session, Solo saw them move and he became aware of a man and a woman standing in the shadows in the rear of the crowded dim room. It was Maxine Trent and Walter Hand! The fat little man was watching the stage. As Solo watched, Hand touched Maxine's arm. Maxine stepped forward and walked to the two men. She whispered to them.

Maxine walked back to Walter Hand. The two men stood and worked their way forward, one at each end of the low stage. Lilli finished her last number, bowed, blew her kisses to the wild applause. She turned and walked stage left. One of the two men had his small black case pointed nonchalantly at her. The man spoke low.

"Miss Kessler, would you honor us by sitting at our table?"

Lilli shook her head. "I'm sorry, I—" She had seen the small black case. She looked behind her and saw the other man at the other end of the stage. The first man was humble.

"I understand, but Mr. Hand remembers you from the old days in Vienna. Surely you can make an exception. It would please Mr. Hand so much."

Lilli hesitated only for the briefest second. Illya on his ladder behind the wall, and Solo at the bar, were alert. They could have shot the men down with silent sleep darts, but that was not the plan. Lilli smiled. It was clear that THRUST was not going to kill her on the spot.

"Mr. Hand? Vienna? Of course! For him I will make an exception. I even have some old papers he would like to see, but, alas, not with me. You understand?"

"Of course," the man said. "But you will join us?"

No one else in the room had noticed a thing. To any stranger, the polite man with the black case was making a friendly invitation, nothing more. The people had watched for a time because they adored Lilli, but when she came down and walked with the man they went back to their own affairs.

Lilli Kessler reached the table and sat down with the two men. They all ordered a drink. Walter Hand joined them. When the drink came, Lilli excused herself. But she did not walk to the ladies room. She walked back to where Maxine stood. She went out with Maxine. Moments later, the two men and Walter Hand got up and walked out.

Solo had slipped out after Lilli

and Maxine. Illya came out after Hand and his two men.

Hidden on the quiet North Beach street there were other U.N.C.L.E. agents. But the THRUSH people made no attempt to harm Lilli. They simply put her into a large black car and drove away.

Solo and Illya were in their own car. Illya turned on the instrument that tracked the homing devices. The two agents waited until the black car was out of sight. Then they drove off after it, with Solo driving and Illya watching the dial of the tracking unit.

ACT IV
SING ALONG WITH THRUSH

THE BUILDING was at the edge of the bay in Oakland. It was a large, squat, windowless building of the type seen on all the waterfronts of the world—a warehouse at the land end of a long pier. All around it there was nothing but other warehouses, darkness, silence and the soft lap-lap-lap of the water of the bay.

The bridge towered in the distance, a blaze of lights high in the damp sky. Far off was the other bridge, the famed Golden Gate Bridge. But it was the near bridge, the long Oakland bridge, that Solo and Illya had come across, led by the homing device somewhere ahead on the diminutive person of Lilli Kessler.

The homing signal had led them to this looming, squat building at the edge of the water. A rusty freighter was tied up at the end of the pier. It was as dark as the windowless monolith of the warehouse in the night. Napoleon Solo pointed to the freighter's superstructure. What looked like a rusted tangle of wire was in reality a highly modern radar device.

"That freighter is more than it seems," Solo said.

"So is the warehouse," Illya said drily. "The question is, how do we get inside?"

"We follow Lilli," Solo said.

"After you," Illya said.

Grinning, Solo led the way out of their car, hidden out of sight from the warehouse, and moved silently through the dark and deserted night to the shadows. Illya came up behind, carrying a small, portable tracking unit. The signal was strong.

"She's just ahead," Illya whispered.

"So far she was right—They are taking her in alive," Solo said.

"So far doesn't count in a matter like this, Napoleon," Illya whispered.

"There is your gloomy Russian soul," Solo whispered.

"I suggest we move on," Illya said.

Solo moved ahead. They came around the corner of the warehouse and saw the black car. There was no guard. Solo crept slowly along

with Illya following. They reached a set of low steps that led to a door. Solo went up the steps and inspected the door while Illya Kuryakin covered him.

"Alarm," Solo whispered.

"The broken circuit kind?" Illya said.

Solo nodded and reached into his pocket. He brought out the electronic device he had used on the door of Manfred Burton's vault. He attached it to the door frame. It was the work of only minutes to pick the lock. Solo opened the door. The two men slipped inside and closed the door. No alarm had gone off.

"Remind me to thank the lab boys for that circuit closer," Solo said.

"If we get out, I will," Illya said.

Inside the door the two agents waited for a few minutes until their eyes became accustomed to the darkness inside. After the few minutes they saw that they were standing on a raised platform above a flight of wooden stairs. Below on the floor of the warehouse there were rows and rows of large crates piled almost to the ceiling that towered two stories above.

Solo led the way down to the warehouse floor. There was no hint of light anywhere. Illya Kuryakin bent over his tracking unit. He pointed directly ahead. Solo nodded, and the two agents began to glide silently along the dark aisle between the piles of crates. They seemed to walk softly for a long time. At last they came to the end of the piles of crates. They looked ahead and saw absolutely nothing.

They came to the far end of the warehouse. There were no rooms, doors or offices. Illya and Solo looked all around. The tracking monitor showed the signal to be close. Illya moved the small instrument around in a circle.

"Not outside," Illya said. "It seems to locate her very close to here."

Solo looked up and down. He looked up again. "The next floor? This warehouse must have about five floors."

Illya shook his head. "It doesn't seem like it. I—

Illya stopped. His wary eyes had seen the door. It was a heavy fire door, with a lever lock, that was like all such doors in warehouses. It had the red light over it, and should lead out to the street. Illya stared at it.

"Do you remember a door outside, Napoleon?" the small, blond Russian said.

Solo looked at the door. It was set in the wall near the rear of the warehouse. The two agents walked softly to the door, then looked back along the whole side wall. Four more tiny red lights glowed all the way back to the front of the warehouse.

"Five," Solo said. "I thought there were only four."

"So did I," Illya said.

The two men inspected the door. It seemed like no more than a normal fire door. Illya studied his tracking monitor.

"She could be somewhere inside there," Illya said.

"The wall is thick," Napoleon Solo said.

Illya glanced around, his eyes narrowed beneath his lowered brows. "Have you noticed that there are no guards, Napoleon?"

"I noticed," Solo said.

"Which means that they are not worried about anyone being in the warehouse."

"And THRUSH is always careful," Solo said.

"So the warehouse itself is only a cover. The real THRUSH installation is somewhere else. Like through that door and—"

"And down below," Solo said.

Illya nodded. "That is what I think. The door will have an alarm, and there will probably be guards on the other side."

"They have to have light and air," Solo said.

"Light!" Illya said. He turned and began to walk carefully around the walls of the silent warehouse. The crates towered into the gloom above. Solo followed.

They found the fuse box on the wall near the door they had first come in through. Illya opened the box. He pointed to a large fuse.

"Master fuse for a high-voltage line," Kuryakin said. "I thought they would have a line like that to operate their electronic equipment."

Solo began to follow the high-voltage cable. It led them back toward the fifth door. It ended about halfway along the wall toward the fifth door. There was a metal cover plate in the stone wall of the warehouse. Without more words, the two agents removed the cover plate They revealed the opening into a conduit areaway just big enough for one man. It was the service crawlway. Illya went first.

The crawlway paralleled the warehouse floor for some distance. Then it angled down. Illya crawled ahead with Solo close behind. After a time, the crawlway straightened out again, running once more horizontal. The two agents crawled on. Twice they heard footsteps close below them, the heavy footsteps of booted feet.

At last the crawlway ended in a sharp down turn. There was a narrow ladder. They went down the ladder and found that they were in a closet where the power lines went into a main box and came out in many smaller lines.

They listened but heard no sound beyond the door. Illya opened the door a crack. The grey-painted steel corridor was empty. He opened the door farther and peered around. The grey corridor was empty in both directions. The two agents emerged from the closet and listened. There were voices to the left. The tracking monitor

showed that Lilli was in that direction.

Solo led the way cautiously along the corridor. The voices grew louder. They reached a door. By their calculations they were now beyond the warehouse and beneath the pier. There were quite a few voices talking beyond the door, some very loud. Illya pointed up at the ceiling of the corridor. Solo looked up.

The corridor, in fact the entire hidden installation, was of the ultra-modern type that builds walls and ceilings of steel panels away from the actual retaining walls. The ceiling especially is a *hung* ceiling, quite a distance from the real ceiling. In the space between there are the air ducts, the wiring, the water lines, all the necessary utilities. It was obvious from the light fixtures that this was such a ceiling—the fixtures were flush-mounted in the ceiling panels.

Illya had pointed to a recessed panel, an opening into the space between the hung ceiling of the corridor and the actual load-bearing ceiling. Solo nodded, and bent.

Illya climbed onto Solo's back, pushed open the panel, and hoisted himself up. He leaned down and helped Solo up and into the space between the real and false ceilings.

Below in the corridor someone was coming. Illya got the panel closed just in time. The guard passed below, stopped outside the door, turned, and patrolled back the other way.

The two agents breathed again. Illya moved very slowly ahead. The two men saw a faint light and heard voices. They crawled very quietly until the voices grew loud and clear. They lay just behind a large grille. It was the ventilation grille and from behind it the entire room was visible. It was a large room of electronic equipment, desks, files and an elegant conference table.

It was also the room where Lilli Kessler stood facing a very tall, emaciated man in a business suit. The man had on dark glasses and wore a thin pencil mustache.

He also held a pistol trained on her.

TWO

LILLI WAS smiling at the cadaverous giant. Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin had their Specials out and ready.

"Shall we go around once more, Miss Kessler?" the emaciated tall man said in a voice that was light and almost effeminate. The glint of the eyes behind the dark glasses was not effeminate.

"What else can I tell you? I did not give the list to U.N.C.L.E. Why should I? I have it safely hidden. But if anything should happen to me, it will go to U.N.C.L.E., yes?"

The emaciated man laughed lightly. "A hollow threat, Miss Kessler. Surely you know that we will change all our couriers the in-

stant you are dead. Do not try to blackmail me!"

The eyes of the cadaverous giant flashed behind dark glasses. Solo and Illya looked at the others in the room, Maxine Trent and the two silent men from *The Barbary Parrot*. There were also Walter Hand and Manfred Burton. The fat little Hand was seated at his ease in a comfortable armchair. Burton was in a straight chair and far less at his ease. The heavy-set sub-leader seemed tense as he watched the emaciated man and Lilli Kessler. It was Burton who spoke.

"Why did you take the list, Lilli? Why did you help them to escape?" Burton said.

Walter Hand snickered. "Really, my dear Manfred, isn't it obvious? The good lady fooled you all the way. She brought U.N.C.L.E. into this, and then she fooled us again with that act of helping to capture them."

Lilli turned, smiled at Hand. "Really, Mr. Hand? Then what am I doing here, eh?"

Hand waved a pudgy hand. "Really, Council Member Z, do we have to go on with this farce? Dispose of her now, and let's get to business. I admit that both Burton and I have equal claim to the microfilm of the plans for the rocket, but I think I have proven more competent. I did not allow a traitor to almost ruin our entire operation, as Burton did."

Solo and Illya, hidden behind the ventilation grille, watched the tall, emaciated man. So this was a member of the infamous THRUSH council. This was Council Member Z. Who he really was they did not know but they knew he would prove to be some man high in some nation of the world. His voice had no accent. He could be from anywhere. Both of the agents memorized his thin face as he waved his pistol arrogantly.

"I will decide who is efficient and competent, Walter," Council Member Z snapped. "Burton has been heavily remiss in allowing this woman into his confidence, as well as by allowing U.N.C.L.E. and your own men to gain access to his files. However, you also have been remiss and lax in allowing Burton to invade your headquarters, and by losing two U.N.C.L.E. men when you had them!"

The fat man went as pale as Burton. "Yes, Councilman Z."

The emaciated Councilman Z now turned to look at Lilli. His eyes again flashed behind the dark glasses. "I believe you were about to explain something, Miss Kessler?"

Lilli shrugged. "I asked what I was doing here. You see I mean, I wanted to know if you had considered why I allowed you to take me?"

"Allowed?" Councilman Z said.

"Of course, allowed. Do you think I did not expect that you

would come for that list? Do you think I had to come to San Francisco?"

Councilman Z nodded. "Go on, Miss Kessler."

"Don't you see? I was telling the truth about the events in New York. Napoleon Solo forced me to help him break into Burton's vault. I knew Kuryakin would arrive, and I betrayed him for you. But I knew I was not completely trusted. So I stole the antidote, the key, and the list. The list was for protection. I knew I was safe as long as I had it. The key and the antidote were to free Solo an Kuryakin. You see, I knew I would need their help to escape finally from Hand's stronghold."

"And you wanted to escape because you did not trust Hand?"

"Exactly. It went very well. Solo and Kuryakin got me out safely. And now I am safely here. Burton and Hand are fools; they would have killed me on sight. But you are much more intelligent. You will wait until you know more."

Councilman Z nodded. "So I will. Haste causes many errors."

"And stupidity," Lilli said.

"And you are not stupid, Miss Kessler?" Councilman Z said.

"No, I am not stupid."

The tall, emaciated Councilman Z nodded slowly. "I believe you. But if you allowed us to capture you again, you must have had a reason. Perhaps you will tell me what that reason is?"

Lilli smiled. "I think you will find out, Council Member."

"Ah?" Councilman Z said, arching an eyebrow. "Well, then, since we have you and you cannot escape, suppose we get on with the main task of the evening. Which one of you gentlemen has the microfilm?"

Burton spoke sourly. "Neither of us. We agreed to give it to Agent Trent to carry."

Councilman Z turned to Maxine. "The film please, Agent Trent."

Maxine handed over the film. Councilman Z took it and went to a desk. On the desk a microscope was set up. Councilman Z placed the first frames of the film under the microscope. Behind their grille, Solo and Illya watched.

They were ready to make their move the instant Councilman Z attempted to leave the room. Surprise would be on their side, and they would have to fight their way out with Lilli. By now, other U.N.C.L.E. agents should be closing in on the warehouse.

Councilman Z peered into the microscope, and then straightened up. "It is in code, of course."

Councilman Z barked an order. The two silent men went to a large object that had been covered by a dust cover. The men removed the dust cover. Solo and Illya behind their grille up near the ceiling of the room saw the instrument that had been uncovered. It was the THRUSH Ultimate Computer! Or,

it was one of the models. A super computer of such an advanced design no other could come close to matching its functions. Councilman Z carried the film to the machine.

"The computer is coded for this code, of course. Bartz sent on the details of the coding system before he died. It was only a matter of locating the microfilm itself. It is unfortunate that we were caused all this trouble by the death of Bartz."

"But we got it back," the fat little Walter Hand said.

Burton snorted. "I got it back, Hand! I located it, not you. Oh, you stole it from me, yes. But I located it!"

Councilman Z snarled. "Stop this childish bickering! We have it, and small credit to either of you! No wonder Bartz would not recommend either of you!"

The two sub-leaders lapsed into a surly silence. Maxine Trent was watching Burton. The two silent men were watching Walter Hand. The tension could almost be cut with a knife. In THRUSH everyone had to be on guard, even when with fellow THRUSH agents. Councilman Z glared at both the sub-leaders and bent to fit the tiny roll of microfilm onto a miniature spindle He stepped back and started the computer.

The tiny roll of film moved through with maddening slowness. It had to move slowly so that the computer could translate its coded information onto a card, including the details of the drawings. In the room the silence was total. Up in the ceiling Illya and Solo held their breath.

It was so silent in the room that even their very light breathing might be heard.

The only sound was the faint hum of the computer as it scanned the film and made its translation of the coded details. The film moved on its spindle. The machine hummed.

Then there was a faint click and a blue light glowed on the face of the computer.

A card dropped out.

Councilman Z went slowly to pick up the card that held the information on another strip of film equally small. The thin giant carried the card to the microscope. He adjusted the scope and peered in. He peered for a long time, pushing the entire card through the microscope.

Then he straightened up. He looked at them all, a towering skeleton with eyes hidden behind the dark glasses.

"Gibberish!" Councilman Z said. "Complete gibberish! !"

Manfred Burton jumped up. "Impossible!"

Councilman Z glared like a maddened lion all around the room. "There is nothing on that film but nonsense!"

The high laugh of Walter Hand echoed through the room.

THREE

MANFRED BURTON was paler than death. He almost swayed as he crossed the room and snatched the card from the hand of Councilman Z. Burton pushed it under the microscope, twirled the dials, peered in, twirled again, and, slowly, stopped moving. He looked up.

"It's impossible!"

"Is it?" Councilman Z said ominously.

"That is the roll of film Bartz had!" Burton shouted.

"No, that is not the roll!" Councilman Z thundered. "I have the proper code. That is not the roll. What did you do with the real roll?"

"I swear this is the roll!" Burton cried.

"U.N.C.L.E.!" Walter Hand said suddenly. "When Maxine found that film it was in Napoleon Solo's hands! He must have switched—"

Councilman Z looked scornful. "How could he? Surely your men searched him? Another roll of film would have been found."

"Well—," the fat THRUSH subleader began.

Burton interrupted him. "That is the roll! My mark is on it! I marked it the moment I took it from Bartz. He needed his heart medicine. I made him give me the film, and swear it was real, before I gave him the medicine. He was frantic. I took the film when he asked for the medicine. I was sure or I wouldn't have let him—"

Burton stopped. They were all staring at him. The heavy-set subleader blinked, looked at them all. Councilman Z was staring hard. Now Councilman Z spoke in a soft, deadly voice.

"You were with him? You let Bartz die?" Councilman Z said.

Burton blinked. "I—No, of course. I mean—"

"You let Bartz die! You withheld the medicine!" Councilman Z roared.

Burton snarled. "He was old! His heart was bad. But he wouldn't let me take over! No! He wouldn't recommend me to—"

The single shot rang out in the closed room. The echoes bounced from the walls. The second shot of Councilman Z's pistol sent Burton sprawling over in a heap. The heavy-set sub-leader lay in a pool of widening blood. He was dead. Walter Hand laughed.

"I knew he was a fool," the fat little man said.

Alarms were clanging. Feet pounded outside the door. The door opened and five THRUSH security guards dashed in, led by a security sergeant. They had their weapons out. But they froze when they saw the emaciated council member holding the pistol. Councilman Z motioned contemptuously.

"Take him out!"

The security soldiers dragged the body out into the corridor and the

door closed. Walter Hand rubbed his fat little hands. He was beaming, but he was also serious. Now he nodded to the tall council member.

"I'll find the real film. That leaves only me. I am the new head of North America. I will start to find the real film at once."

It was Lilli Kessler who now spoke. The petite blonde moved out to stand in front of Councilman Z. She smiled.

"There is no need to look," Lilli said.

Hand whirled. "What the devil do you—"

"You have the correct film of the rocket plans," Lilli said.

Up behind their grille, Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin looked at each other. They released the safeties on their Specials. What was happening? Their eyes told them that each was asking the same question. What was happening. And in their eyes was the same answer.

Walter Hand and Councilman Z in the room also had the same question in their eyes. But they did not yet have the answer. Councilman Z watched the petite blonde singer carefully.

"We have the correct films?" Councilman Z said quietly.

Lilli nodded. "Yes, Council Member, you have the proper films of the rocket plans. Burton was quite correct."

"How in hell can you—" Walter Hand began.

Councilman Z waved him to silence. "You can prove this, Miss Kessler?"

"I am not in the habit of making statements I cannot prove."

"Ah?" Councilman Z said. "Then I take it that this is what you meant when you said we would find out just what you came here for? Why you allowed us to capture you?"

Lilli shrugged. "I did not know the location of the meeting. Also, I needed help and protection in case Hand or Burton tried to kill me first. You see, Council Member, they had the organization! I was alone. I could take no chances. They might have learned of my status within Interpol, and—"

"Interpol!" Hand cried. "You see, Council Member? She admits that—"

"Be quiet, Hand," Councilman Z thundered. He looked long and hard at Lilli. "If you were with Interpol, Miss Kessler, you have signed your death warrant by coming here, no matter—"

"Perhaps, Council Member, you will allow me to demonstrate? I think you will understand. Besides, *cheri,* you do want those rocket plans, yes?"

Councilman Z nodded very slowly. Walter Hand shuddered with fury. The fat little sub-leader could not control his anger.

"I protest! This woman is a traitor. I—"

Councilman Z looked slowly at

Hand. "I believe I told you to be quiet, didn't I?"

Hand paled and became silent. Councilman Z nodded to Lilli.

"I want the plans, Miss Kessler. You may proceed."

Lilli motioned to the computer. "Have the roll of microfilm run through the computer once more, Council Member. But this time set the machine for voice programming as well."

Councilman Z waved his hand toward the two silent men, ordering them to do as Lilli asked. The two men rewound the tiny roll of film. Then they set the machine for voice pickup. They stood back to show that they were ready.

Councilman Z nodded.

One of the men started the computer. Walter Hand stared. Maxine Trent watched from half closed eyes. Councilman Z showed no expression on his face, his eyes quiet behind the dark glasses.

The tiny roll of film began to move through the computer. Behind their grille up near the ceiling, Solo and Illya watched as if hypnotized, unable to move as the strange scene was played out below. In the silence of the room, Lilli began to sing.

The smoky voice enunciated the lyrics *Lili Marlene,* slowly and clearly in her native German. The sad old song seemed to completely fill the room as the throaty-voiced singer poured out the tragic story of the girl and the soldier.

The room was as quiet as the clubs where she performed. Her phrasing was the old magic that had charmed men on four continents, in all the cities of Europe, and far across the dim cafe and clubs of America.

Lilli sang, and the tiny roll of microfilm continued to move so slowly through the computer.

Then it stopped; the blue light glowed again on the front of the computer. The card dropped out. Councilman Z strode to the machine and picked up the card. He looked at it for a moment, and then he looked at Lilli. Then he walked to the microscope, placed the card under it again, turned the dials, and bent down to look at the strip of film on the card.

The room was totally soundless.

Councilman Z twirled dials, ran the entire card through the microscope.

Walter Hand sweated, mopped his fat little face. Lilli just stood there quietly. Maxine had moved away from Walter Hand.

Councilman Z straightened up. "These are the plans."

Everyone looked at Lilli. The petite blonde smiled and shrugged at the same time.

"You see, Augustus Bartz and I had been working together for a long time. But I had no true status within THRUSH. Augustus always trusted me above everyone else, and he wanted someone he could trust that no one else knew about.

We worked out the voice activated code many years ago. I transmitted many of his messages that way. That Interpol man at the Cafe Lieder was becoming suspicious; he was taking down my musical arrangements. I had to have him killed."

"What about Interpol?" Councilman Z said quietly.

"I have been a double agent for many years. It was most useful. Even U.N.C.L.E. trusted me!" and Lilli Kessler laughed aloud.

"You could have come to council and explained," Councilman Z said.

Lilli raised an eyebrow. "Without the plans? Would you have believed me? No, I had to have the plans. But Burton had them. So I enlisted U.N.C.L.E. to help me get them. They were most helpful, the fools! Then Hand stole them from me. After that I knew my only chance was to be present at this meeting. U.N.C.L.E. was most helpful again!"

"You and Bartz always planned it this way?" Councilman Z said slowly.

Lilli nodded. "Augustus always used the musically-keyed film. That way, if anything happened to him, I would be the only one who could interpret the film. He thought it would prove to Council how much he thought of me, how efficient and useful I was, and would help me convince the council."

Councilman Z nodded slowly. "Convince the council of what, Miss Kessler?"

"Convince you that I should be named the chief of all North American operations!"

"Never!" Walter Hand shouted. The fat little man was shaking with rage and frustration.

Lilli Kessler laughed. "And as my first act, I can deliver two first rate U.N.C.L.E. agents who are watching us right now!"

FOUR

IT WAS ONLY Walter Hand that saved Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin. Trapped up inside the roof, their faces at the grille and watching, they would have had no chance if THRUSH had acted at once. They began crawling back at once, but there would have been no hope except for Walter Hand.

The fat little sub-leader spewed hatred and oaths at Lilli Kessler. He screamed at the tall, cadaverous council member. He waved his short, fat arms.

"I am the new chief! There is no one else! Do you hear me?"

Councilman Z stared stonily. "Council will decide that, Hand."

"No!" Hand screamed. "No, the council will not decide that! This is my territory! I have the organization. I give the orders here, do you all understand?"

"You would oppose us?" Councilman Z said ominously.

Hand raged. "If I have to, yes!

I will oppose the whole lot of you. I am the chief here, and I will hold you if I have to!"

Councilman Z turned purple with anger. "You are threatening me! You dare to threaten a council member!"

"Dare?" Hand screamed. "Yes, I dare! I have the power here! These are my people! Maxine, shoot this woman! Shoot her now! Kill her!"

"Will you kill me?" Councilman Z thundered.

"If I have to!" Hand screamed. "Maxine! Kill that woman! Shoot! Shoot!"

Maxine shot. The sound of the shot reverberated through the closed room.

Walter Hand fell dead instantly, shot through the head by the single bullet.

Maxine Trent held her pistol. She smiled at Lilli Kessler.

"It will be good to have a woman chief, Miss Kessler."

"Thank you, Maxine," Lilli said.

The tall council member smiled as he looked at the dead body of Walter Hand. In THRUSH only results counted, only winners had an organization. Maxine had joined the winning side, and Walter Hand had gotten the THRUSH reward for failure—he was dead.

Lilli looked up at the grille. "He has held us up! They will escape."

"I think not," Councilman Z said grimly.

The tall man strode to a communications console. He flipped a switch.

"All guards, all security. Two U.N.C.L.E. agents are in the building. Block all exits from below, and block all exits from the warehouse. Hunt them down at once. Shoot on sight."

All through the complex of rooms shields came down and locks double locked automatically. Councilman Z turned back to Lilli and Maxine.

"They will be stopped, Madam Chief!" Councilman Z said, and he smiled at Lilli Kessler.

ILLYA KURYAKIN and Solo had dropped into the corridor just before they heard the shot that killed Walter Hand. They ran for the closet and the conduit. The shot rang through the corridors. Two guards appeared in the corridor as if by magic. Napoleon Solo shot both of them down with his silent sleep darts.

Illya and Solo jumped over them. Two more appeared. The U.N.C.L.E. men shot at the same time. Both men fell under the darts.

"No time for the crawlway!" Illya cried.

"The exit!" Solo panted. "It has to be near."

"There!" Illya said.

The exit up to the fifth door was a tiny, narrow elevator. Solo and Illya crowded in and started up. They reached the door just as alarms began to sound all through

the complex of rooms. They opened the door and were out in the warehouse. Almost at once a steel panel slammed down behind them, a panel that would have trapped them in the elevator seconds sooner.

All through the dark warehouse the panels slammed down over the doors. Illya and Solo plunged into the shadows of the piled crates. They heard the voices of the guards all through the warehouse. Booted feet ran up and down the aisles.

Solo and Illya slunk in among the crates that towered up to the dim ceiling. Kuryakin looked up and pointed. High above there was an overhead crane used for stacking the crates. It ran on a track which led to an opening in the warehouse, very high up on the pier side. Obviously the track ran from the warehouse all the way out along the pier to where the ships could be unloaded.

THRUSH had neglected to provide an emergency barrier for the high overhead track.

"If we can get up there we have a chance, Napoleon," Illya said.

"It would help if we had wings," Solo said.

"Where is your improvisation? We'll fake it."

"Think good thoughts and we can fly."

"I prefer to plan good plans," Illya said drily, "and our witty remarks are losing us time."

The THRUSH guards had formed against the walls. Their leader was dividing up the floor space. Soon they would move out from both sides and comb every inch of the floor and the piled crates. Illya motioned to Solo to start climbing.

They climbed the crates on the shadow side. It was slow work. The THRUSH guards were already in the stacks of crates, probing as they moved slowly ahead. Solo and Illya inched up. At last they reached the top of the pile. Solo reached up as Illya watched the guards below.

"Too short!" Solo whispered.

The reach of the handsome chief agent was two feet too short. Illya Kuryakin looked up, and then down at the guards below.

"We'll have to move a crate," Illya whispered.

"Let's move it," Solo said.

The crates were very heavy. The two agents strained. At last they broke one loose and heaved it up onto the top of the stack. Below, the guards had almost met. When they did, they would look elsewhere, including up.

Solo and Illya had the crate up on the stack. They climbed onto it. The hook of the crane dangled directly above them. Solo swung up. He reached down and hoisted Illya up into the operators cab of the crane. The controls were in the cab. Solo studied them for a moment.

"There!"

"Up there!"

"They're in the crane!"

The shouts came from below. The THRUSH guards opened fire. The cab of the crane was steel and the bullets glanced off. Illya crouched and returned the fire with his Special set on bullets now. The THRUSH guards scattered for cover. At the other end of the warehouse some guards were already climbing to get on a level with the crane.

Solo began to operate the controls. The crane moved out toward the high opening in the side of the warehouse. It reached a point where there were no crates below, only open space. The opening was near.

"They'll just chase us out!" Solo said. "The crane comes to an end at the end of the pier."

"We won't go that far," Illya shouted. "We'll get out and up on the roof of the warehouse."

"Good, we—" Solo began.

He did not finish. The crane shuddered to a halt a good ten feet from the opening. They were at least twenty feet from the nearest giant stack of crates. Below there was nothing but a two story drop and the THRUSH guards looking up.

There was a laugh. A woman laughed.

"We control the crane from down here, Napoleon and my dear illya," Lilli Kessler's voice said over a loudspeaker system. "You might just as well surrender. There is no escape now. Before you die, let me thank you for all your help, *lieblings.*"

Illya and Solo said nothing. They crouched in the cab of the crane, out of range of the bullets of the THRUSH guards. But the guards were climbing ladders on both walls now. Soon the THRUSH guns would be above Illya and Solo.

The cab began to move back toward the crates. Illya and Solo tensed to leap. The crane stopped after a few feet.

"As you see, we do control the crane," the voice of the cadaverous giant Councilman Z said over the loudspeaker. "You might as well come down, my friends. It is easier to die on the ground."

Lilli's voice chuckled grotesquely over the loudspeaker. "You will have time to reflect on trusting people. We must, of course, ask you many questions."

Illya and Solo looked down, and then around. Trapped in the cab of the crane, they watched the THRUSH guards almost in range above them. They raised their Specials.

The explosion shook the warehouse.

One of the outer doors blew open in a great cloud of smoke. Another door blew in. A voice boomed out louder than the explosions or the other voices.

"Put down your weapons! This is Alexander Waverly with the police. All THRUSH men will put down their guns. We have you all

surrounded. You cannot escape!"

In an instant, the warehouse was a scene of wild chaos.

FIVE

THE THRUSH men formed a line behind the boxes. Firing rose in a loud crescendo as the police broke into the warehouse. They came from all sides. The THRUSH men, caught in a cross fire, blinded by tear gas bombs, fought desperately, but hopelessly.

In the cab of the crane, Napoleon Solo pointed down. "They're covering for the getaway of Councilman Z and Lilli Kessler!"

"Move it!" Kuryakin shouted.

Solo worked the controls. They were under the control of the cab again. They reached the pile of crates and leaped out. They half slid, half climbed down the great mound of crates to where the fifth door stood closed. Two THRUSH men blocked their way. Solo shot them both.

In the melee, no more THRUSH men thought of them. The door below was locked, sealed.

"The crawlway!" Solo shouted.

They ran to the cover plate, opened it inward and crawled again into the electrical conduit crawlway. They crawled faster this time —the plans for the rocket were still below. They reached the closet and jumped out into the corridor. Two THRUSH men ran past without even noticing them. They turned left and raced to the door of the big conference and control room.

Two guards were in the room. They fired and missed. Illya did not miss. There was nothing else in the room. The computer was gone. Solo and Illya ran back into the corridor.

"They would have to escape by water," Illya said.

Solo nodded. "That way then, toward the pier!"

The two agents raced along the corridor. They heard faintly the sound of an engine. They ran faster. Up above the noise of firing was slackening. Solo and Illya raced on until they rounded a corner in the bright corridor and came into a large underground room. They stopped.

The sight that greeted their eyes was a scene from some nightmare.

The room was long and low, little more than an old sewer. Rats ran and water sloshed across the stones. A deep channel ran along the far wall. They realized that they were beneath the pier at the edge of the bay.

Men struggled with the heavy model of the Ultimate Computer. They sweated, cursing, their clothes torn in the effort of moving the giant machine.

At the edge of the water, urging them on with frantic commands, was the emaciated giant, Councilman Z. His eyes behind the dark glasses looked up continually toward the door into the bright cor-

ridor. Beside him Maxine Trent and Lilli Kessler urged the men on.

Then they saw Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin.

Councilman Z fired at them with his pistol. Maxine fired.

Illya and Solo ducked to the floor.

The men sweating with the computer dropped it and clawed for their weapons.

Solo and Illya laid down a withering fire. The THRUSH men went down as if cut by some giant scythe. Illya and Solo jumped up. Maxine turned and leaped into the water. She made a great splash. But she did not sink. She stood on some kind of solid object. Then Solo and Illya saw the tiny conning tower—there was a midget submarine in the channel.

Solo and Illya ran forward. The tall, cadaverous council member held up an object.

"Stop! This is a lethal gas bomb! Do not move another step!"

Solo and Illya halted. Councilman Z held the small bomb high and his eyes flashed behind the dark glasses in the sewerlike room. In the same hand he held a small briefcase.

Maxine stood on the small submarine. Lilli Kessler was at the side of Councilman Z. The petite blonde almost snarled as she looked back at Solo and Illya. The two agents tensed for an attack. Councilman Z watched them. Then Lilli turned, her face twisted in anger. She looked up at the council member.

"We must leave the computer! I'll return and take care of them!" Lilli said.

Councilman Z studied Lilli Kessler from behind his dark glasses. He smiled a thin smile.

"No, my dear, you will not return. You were smart, yes, but not smart enough. You led Alexander Waverly to us! You are no more use to us now!"

A pistol appeared in Councilman Z's free hand.

The two shots rang out at the same instant.

His eyes on Lilli for a split second, Councilman Z did not see Illya Kuryakin shoot. Illya's shot struck his hand and he dropped the gas bomb and the briefcase into the water.

The shot of Councilman Z hit Lilli.

Lilli Kessler went down. The council member grabbed for the briefcase and missed. It floated away. Maxine Trent had vanished into the submarine. Solo and Illya fired as Councilman Z leaped for the conning tower. They both hit the giant council member. He staggered, clawed for the conning tower. It was closed!

Councilman Z beat frantically on the closed conning tower. The sub began to go down. He hammered, screamed. The sub inexorably sank beneath the water. He stopped hammering, turned with the water up to his waist, and his dying eyes

stared back at Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin as the midget submarine disappeared beneath the water.

In THRUSH there was no waiting for any one.

When Alexander Waverly appeared in the sewerlike room, Councilman Z still floated face down in the water. THRUSH bodies littered the room. Napoleon Solo had retrieved the briefcase and found the decoded plans for the new rocket inside. Illya stood over Lilli Kessler.

The petite blonde looked up, a smile on her face now. She had been shot through the shoulder and her pain was great. Blood dripped down through her hand that was pressed to the wound. She coughed, and her smoky voice was a faint frightened whisper. She looked at Alexander Waverly through half-closed eyes.

"How?"

Waverly was solemn. In all his years he had never been able to watch intense suffering, even the agony of evil. He cleared his throat.

"A transmitter, Miss Kessler. One of the homing devices I had planted on you was actually a small transmitter. We heard it all. What you told Council Member Z."

Lilli Kessler coughed. "A transmitter? Then you—you never believed me?"

Waverly rubbed his chin. "Let us say I had certain vague suspicions. You were, uh, too convenient. You were too anxious to risk your life by returning to THRUSH here in San Francisco. Let us say I had a hunch."

Lilli nodded. "Yes, I was—afraid you—might."

"It occurred to me that your *help* to get the microfilm could have been because you wanted it. When captured by Hand, it struck me that we helped you to escape Hand as much as you helped Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin."

Lilli Kessler looked at Solo and Illya. "They knew?"

"No," Waverly said. "All I had was a vague suspicion. I thought it best not to inform them. They had to act as if they believed you if you were to be fooled into leading us here."

"You are very—clever," Lilli said. "I see why you are—Chief—"

"Let us say I am older, too old to be taken in completely by a charming singer," Waverly said.

"Smart," Lilli said. "Yes, very clever. I was—not clever—enough."

The petite blonde looked at all of them, coughed a racking cough. Her eyes were suddenly wide. "I should have—remained—a singer. I was—good."

And Lilli Kessler fainted dead away.

Two days later the warehouse had been stripped, Walter Hand's stronghold was destroyed, and Manfred Burton's town house was also stripped bare. The submarine

was not found. The records of all the North American affairs of THRUSH were in U.N.C.L.E.'s hands. Waverly sat in his office with a broad smile for once.

"The plans are recovered. THRUSH will be a long time rebuilding in North America," Waverly said. "A council member is dead, and a potentially very dangerous THRUSH is gone. All in all a very good piece of work, gentlemen."

Illya was not happy. "Lilli—such a mellow voice. I've all her records."

"Yes, a fine voice, but she had wrong ambitions," Waverly said. "She was very clever. Interpol never even suspected her, Mr. Kuryakin."

"She sang so well," Illya said. "I wonder if she'll recover; she was severely wounded. What could've caused her to turn bad?"

"Difficult to say, Mr. Kuryakin! A hard life and working with THRUSH, too. There was a twist in her mind. There are a thousand reasons for evil. But she is still on the hospital's critical list. Who knows—we may see her again!"

Solo sighed. "The submarine got away though."

"Really, Mr. Solo, we can't expect to succeed at everything," Waverly said.

"No, I mean that she's done it again," Solo said.

"She?"

"Maxine," Solo said. "She was on the submarine."

Waverly nodded. "I see your point. That woman will be your undoing, Mr. Solo."

Illya smiled. "She will if Solo has his way."

"We all have to be undone someday," Napoleon Solo said with a smile.

Waverly began to look for a match. He raised a bushy eyebrow at Solo. Waverly was not smiling.

Illya Kuryakin grinned.

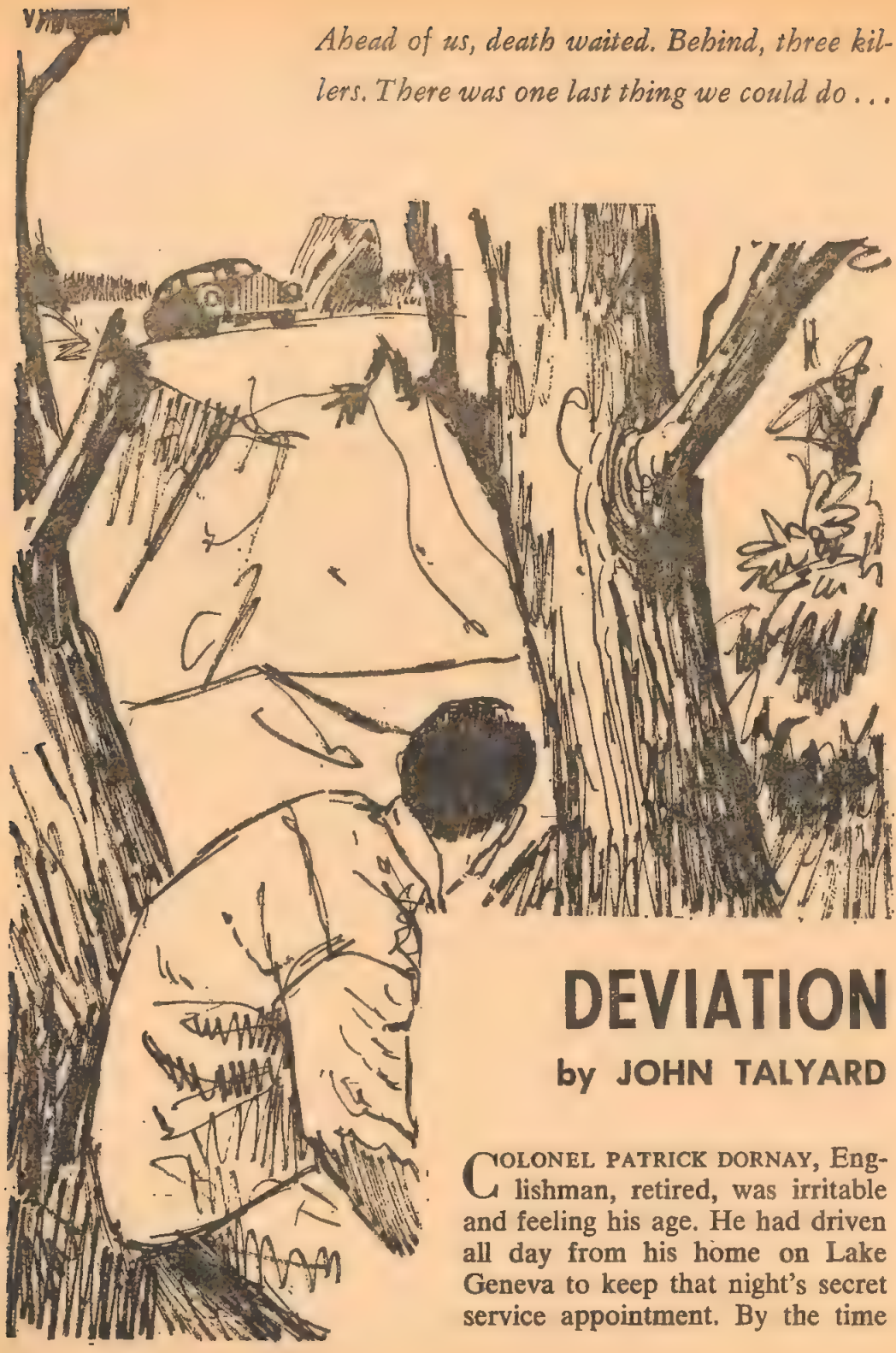
NEXT MONTH'S NEW U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL:

THE GOLIATH AFFAIR

Trapped, alone, Solo and Illya face their most aweful foe of all—an army of mindless girl giants, who know but one law in life: "U.N.C.L.E. agents must be killed on sight."

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Ahead of us, death waited. Behind, three killers. There was one last thing we could do . . .



DEVIATION

by JOHN TALYARD

COLONEL PATRICK DORNAY, Englishman, retired, was irritable and feeling his age. He had driven all day from his home on Lake Geneva to keep that night's secret service appointment. By the time

he reached the attic hideaway in Vienna he was thoroughly out of sorts. With all due respect to the two men there, he found the proposal outrageous.

He was in complete accordance with the briefing—to a point. He agreed to drive that night with this ridiculously young (twenty-four-year-old) Lieutenant O'Shea to the Czech border near Gmund. Dornay admitted that the matter was important. After all, they had gone to great lengths to summon him from Geneva, and London did that only rarely.

The assignment was to pick up a Czech called Hlavsa outside of Gmund. Hlavsa would be carrying documents related to the subversive activities of the Czech socialist party and a code book for communications between Prague and embassies in Western Europe.

But when they moved on to the matter of disguises, Patrick Dornay hit the ceiling.

"No!"

Dornay limped through the low attic room, punctuating his expletives with bursts of pipe smoke.

"On principle I never wear disguise. Myself and my mustache and my car have been my trademarks for twenty-five years."

"Quite so, Colonel Dornay," Captain McGuire said helplessly from behind the table. "We were only thinking of your own protection."

"My bad knee would give me away anyhow," Dornay grumbled as he swung across the room.

Captain McGuire glanced at Lieutenant O'Shea and took the plunge, "And then there is the matter of your car."

The lieutenant interposed, "We thought it was a a bit old—"

"Old!" Patrick Dornay marched to the table and propped his hands on it. "There is no car on the road that can catch my nineteen thirty-five Bentley." He straightened and folded his arms.

"Gentlemen, I shall be pleased to perform this ridiculous mission as Colonel Patrick Dornay." He puffed a tremendous cloud of smoke at the captain. "As no one else."

Captain McGuire sighed again. "As you wish, Colonel." He turned back to the formal briefing. "We're most interested in Hlavsa's code book, and of course in getting him safely out of Austria, fast. He intends to sell his documents in Switzerland. If the code book is genuine, the Service is inclined to buy."

He consulted his notes. "Our contact says you'll have about twenty-four hours from the time Hlavsa crosses the Czech border near Ceske Velenice until they'll know he's gone. That's time enough for you to drive him to Switzerland. Our Bern people will pick him up there. These are his new passport and papers."

The final item was a pair of pocket-sized two-way radios for

Patrick and Lieutenant O'Shea. Patrick knew the type and was pleased.

He elaborated on them at great length, mentioning facts such as their wide range, hitherto unknown to O'Shea.

Then, as he and O'Shea rose to go, Patrick Dornay said to the captain wickedly, "Obviously you can't go on this one yourself without being missed. Sources in Geneva have it they watch you closely all the time."

"We know." McGuire sounded discouraged as he shook their hands.

"As I see it," Dornay drew on his pipe, "this Hlavsa fellow might well be a lure for you, Captain. Heaven knows they'd love to catch you."

"Quite." Captain McGuire sighed. "That's why London decided to put you on the job, sir."

Patrick Dornay continued musing. "Or it is just barely possible that Hlavsa really wants to defect and sell his papers for profit? Not likely." He snorted. "Those guys are scared of their own shadows. Come along, O'Shea," he finished, "let's go see if this Hlavsa is for real."

Dornay nodded farewell and, followed by the lieutenant, limped stiffly from the room.

They reached Gmund and moved into their nondescript inn. The following day O'Shea studied road maps of Austria and Switzerland, while Patrick Dornay fussed over the car. By mid-afternoon, both men were rested, conversant with road conditions, and at home with their walkie-talkies. By eleven that evening, when their passenger arrived, they were ready to go.

Hlavsa hurried into the hotel's tiny restaurant as though he were being thrust. He looked untidy and exhausted and he flashed Dornay a startled look.

"Why, Colonel Dornay!" he gulped, and sat down hard.

Dornay said, "Hum."

Hlavsa held his leather case between his knees, and glanced nervously at the dark windows and the lights of automobiles passing.

Dornay seemed suddenly to be in no hurry whatsoever. Turning to O'Shea, he said, "Check his gear, will you?"

Hlavsa jumped as if stung.

"No!" he said. "No, please. Please take me away to Switzerland."

"As you wish." Patrick Dornay uncorked his pocket flask deliberately. "Here, have one for the road. It'll be a long one." He poured Hlavsa a healthy glassful.

Then he turned silently to him and stared.

Hlavsa cringed.

Dornay continued to stare over his pipe until Hlavsa's eyes dropped and he finished his brandy at a gulp. Still without a word, Dornay rose and led the defector and the lieutenant out to the car. He put the Czech beside him in the front seat, O'Shea behind, and they drove off.

Patrick Dornay nosed the open Bentley southward, towards the main road to Linz. Hlavsa's head nodded, his eyelids closed, opened, closed again.

"Keep it up, old boy," Dornay said softly, pipe clamped between his teeth. "You'll be asleep in five minutes." And he was.

"Congratulations, sir," said O'Shea from the rear seat. "Our passenger seems to know you, sir."

Patrick Dornay chuckled. "We met before, when the Russians were still here. In nineteen fifty-two. At that time he called himself Captain Jan Subotka." And he went on as though reading the contents of Hlavsa's file. "Speaks English fairly well, French, German and Russian, of course. Now he seems to deal in codes."

And then Dornay's back suddenly straightened. He caught his breath. "Lieutenant," lapsing into military crispness, "tuck yourself into the corner of the back seat and check that car behind us. I think we're being followed."

Lieutenant O'Shea complied, and Dornay slowed the Bentley to a crawl.

"It's a Tatra," O'Shea reported. "Three people. Diplomatic corps car.

"Don't want to overtake, do they?"

Dornay eased the Bentley up a notch and the Tatra kept pace. He pushed up to sixty and the Tatra stayed right behind.

Hlavsa snored heavy aspirate breaths. Lieutenant O'Shea kept tense silence while Patrick Dornay sat easily behind the wheel, humming a little under his breath.

At the next sharp curve the pursuer swung broadside to the Bentley for a second and a bullet ricochetted against the old car's rear fender.

"There we go!" Dornay crowed. "Showed their colors, didn't they? Looks like we've been double-crossed by our sleeping friend." He pushed the accelerator to the floor. "Now let those blinking fools catch me!"

The Czech groaned in his sleep as, leaving the Tatra far behind, the Bentley crouched into curves and leapt down ill-seen straightaways.

Dornay kept up his *sotto voce* humming, beating time on the steering wheel with one well-gloved finger.

"Lieutenant!" he shouted over the roar of the wind. "Enjoy speed?"

"I think so, sir!" O'Shea answered warily.

"Nothing like it!" Dornay agreed at the top of his lungs. "I think we've walked into a trap," he went on. "That Tatra found us a little too quickly."

And then, "In about five minutes, Lieutenant, we're going to reach a deviation. New bridge under construction. Roughly ninety yards long. Driving round through the valley and climbing out of it will cost me about fifteen minutes. Winding, narrow road goes through a hamlet."

Flashing red warning lights lurched into view. Then red and white oil drums across the road and an arrow pointing to the detour at the right. The Bentley skidded to a stop.

"You'll clearly see my tail lights up there." Dornay nodded ahead beyond the barrier. "That'll surprise them!"

The lieutenant stepped out.

"They're twenty miles behind us," Dornay said. "Don't give yourself more than ten minutes to clear these barriers off the road. Kill those warning lights and good luck! Oh, and turn on your Japanese gadget." And he put his own two way radio on the back seat.

O'Shea's answering, "Good luck, sir!" was lost in a cloud of dust as the Bentley shot down the detour and vanished into the night.

It took Dornay ten minutes to complete the detour and back his car through the barriers on the opposite side of the ravine. He stopped where his tail lights made a clear decoy across the tumbled construction work that opened to the river a good seventy feet below.

Five minutes passed. Another five. And then the three headlights of the Tatra bore down the road. Hlavsa moved restlessly beside Patrick Dornay.

The big car approached too quickly. It careened to the now unmarked cliff edge. There were shrieks of frantic braking. Headlights arched downward, metal roared and crunched against rock. Headlights catapulted down again. A splash, and finally the *whoosh* of gasoline igniting.

Dornay heaved a deep sigh. "Well, that's that."

"You rotten English killer!" The Czech's growl brought Dornay's focus—too late—back to his companion at his left. He turned to face the nozzle of a gun, and Hlavsa's furious, bleary eyes.

Dornay frowned at him in the light of the burning car. He was clearly irritated.

"My dear fellow." he said. "Didn't I give you enough sleeping draught?"

The other grimaced. "We weren't bargaining for the unforgettable Colonel Patrick Dornay," he said. "But our leaders will be pleased I caught you instead of Captain McGuire."

"Fiddlesticks!" Dornay fumed.

"Doesn't surprise me at all that you came out under false pretenses. Were you surprised when I walked into your trap?"

Hlavsa prodded him with his gun and laughed. "The fool who never uses disguise."

"Oh, come now!" Dornay spoke a bit too loudly. "Put down that filthy Russian hardware!"

From the backseat an authoritative voice echoed him. "Drop the gun, Hlavsa!"

A split second of uncertainty. Dornay's right hand pushed the gun's muzzle towards the windshield. His left hand swished out and caught the Czech across his Adam's apple. He sagged.

"You all right, sir?" came the back seat voice again.

"Quite, thank you," Dornay answered. "Grand to hear your voice. Now get those markers back in place and fix the warning lights. You'll find a gravel path three hundred yards down the deviation." He reached into the back seat and picked up his radio.

He cradled it in his hand as he went on, "Can't turn the car any place else on that narrow track. So I'll pick you up at the path just as soon as I've tidied up a bit here. Fine things, these two-way sets, what?"

Within half an hour they were on the move again. Hlavsa was locked in the boot, documents, code book and all.

"Thanks for quick thinking, Lieutenant." Dornay flashed a grin from beneath his mustache, as he backed the car slowly onto the path.

"Don't mention it," O'Shea beamed back. "Only, sir, if I may —um—one question?"

"Yes?" Dornay was busy getting his pipe lit.

Lieutenant O'Shea spoke hesitantly, "It still seems to me you would have been safer in a disguise."

"Bosh!" Dornay's pipe was going nicely, and he eased the Bentley into first gear. He cocked an eyebrow at the lieutenant. "What's the fun of being in this business if nobody recognizes you?"

Another DEPARTMENT OF LOST STORIES Masterpiece

Coming Soon

OUR FAIR CITY

A FANTASY OF STRANGE TERROR

by ROBERT HEINLEIN

DEPARTMENT of LOST STORIES

A previously published story is not necessarily a permanently preserved story, available to everyone. Too often, in fact, it is just the opposite. So transitory is magazine publication alone—usually thirty days on sale—that far too many outstanding tales are overlooked and forgotten before they have their deserved chance to become famous. For many years this very real loss of talent and deserved fame has troubled us, so much that we have decided to do something about it. And this magazine, "The Man from U.N.C.L.E.," because of its very freshness and unconventional approach, would seem to be the perfect medium in which to do it. From time to time, therefore, in this magazine, you will see the Department of Lost Stories. *When you do, read with care and discrimination. You will be reading a story which, whatever its field, whoever its author, has been revered and remembered as too good to be forgotten. "Hell on Earth," by the famous Robert Bloch, is one of these. You'll remember it.*

THE EDITORS

I

Devil's Brew

LET ME ASK you a question," said my visitor. "Would you go to hell for ten thousand dollars?"

"Brother, just show me the money and tell me when the next train leaves," I told him.

"I'm serious."

I sat back and did my goldfish imitation—staring with my mouth open. I'm pretty good at it.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You haven't got a cloven hoof. You're not crazy, and you don't take drugs. You're Professor Phillips Keith, Associate Director of Rocklynn Institute. And you're offering me ten thousand dollars to go to hell."

The pudgy little man with the graying hair adjusted his spectacles and smiled. He looked for all the world like a kindly bishop as he answered, "I'd rather see you go to hell for me than anyone else I can think of."

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HELL ON EARTH

by ROBERT BLOCH

To fantasy-horror story buffs all over the world, Robert Bloch needs no introduction. In fact, a leading British literary magazine, evaluating the status of all-time fantasy greats—going back to Jules Verne and H. G. Wells—names Mr. Bloch among the first ten. He is most generally known as the author of the best selling novel "Psycho" which was made into the justly praised movie of the same name. A former newspaper man from the Middle West, Mr. Bloch wrote many top drawer stories of the macabre and the borderland between the real and the unknown. Of them, "Hell on Earth" has been acclaimed as one of his best. It is but fitting that he join, with this story, the great writers of fantasy and terror who will appear in the "Department of Lost Stories." Read it. You won't soon forget it!
THE EDITORS

Plump fingers held out a newspaper clipping. "Read this."

SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTE TO BECOME WITCHCRAFT DEN

The world-famous Rocklynn Institute will be transformed into a rendezvous for goblins and demons, according to the plans of Thomas M. Considine, wealthy philanthropist.

Considine has authorized a donation of $50,000 to be used in what he describes as a "scientific study of sorcery and Black Magic."

Professor Phillips Keith today announced that Rocklynn Institute is "seriously contemplating" the possibilities of the project. Scientific basis for ancient magic is by no means improbable, Keith declared, and such a study may yield valuable results.

Vendors of black cats, dried toads, and love-philtres might find it worth their while to apply at the Rocklynn Institute in the near future.

"Lousy piece of writing," I said, handing the clipping back to Keith. "Now, get serious! What's the real story?"

Keith rose. "Why not come along with me and find out for yourself?" he asked.

"So it's no gag, then," I mused.

"Not just a publicity stunt. You're really going through with something like this?"

The eyes behind the spectacles were penetrating in their gray intensity. "I've never been more serious about anything in my life," declared Keith.

"It was I who badgered Thomas Considine into donating that money. For years it has been my ambition to conduct experiments along this line. Too bad the papers got hold of the story—but from now on there will be no publicity. No one must know that Rocklynn Institute is attempting to raise the dead and conjure up daemons in the heart of downtown New York."

Now if there is one thing I have learned in this vale of tears, it's this —you don't tell a man he's crazy when he has fifty thousand dollars to spend. Particularly if he has just offered you ten thousand of it.

So all I said was, "That's fine. But where do I fit into this picture?"

Keith smiled, as he swung the car towards a parking lot.

"Simple. Your name was given to me as a writer of so-called horror-fiction. As such I expect you to be more or less conversant with demonology and witchcraft lore."

"Right. But I certainly don't believe such bunk."

"Exactly! That's my point—while you are in a position to understand what we're attempting, you still don't believe. In other words, you are an average, skeptical representative of John Public. That's why you were chosen to act as official eye-witness and historian of our endeavors. You know what's going on, but you don't believe in it. You will be shown. In other words, you're being hired as a witness."

"You mean ten thousand dollars for standing around and watching you play witch? Ten grand to see you ride a broomstick?"

Keith laughed. "You're almost too skeptical. Come on. I think you need an immediate example."

We entered the skyscraper, purred upwards in the private elevator, stepped briskly across the business-like outer lobby of Rocklynn Institute's spacious quarters on the penthouse floor. Keith led me along the hall to a door marked *Private.*

He pushed it open, beckoned.

Usually I hate such doors. I hate the smugness of their curt warning. *Private!*

But if ever a door deserved such a marking, this one did. For it barred madness.

BLACK madness, in a velvet draped room. Red madness, in the flickering braziers winking demonic eyes from shadowy niches.

We stood in a dark chamber, hidden in the topmost recesses of a modern skyscraper—a dark chamber, reeking of blood, musk, hashish, and the tomb.

It was a room torn from the Fif-

teenth Century, a room torn from ancient dreams.

True, the tables and shelvings were modern, but they groaned with the impedimenta of forgotten nightmares. I looked down at the first ledge beside me, and a casual glance convinced.

A rack of test-tubes reared from the surface. Modern Pyrex, but labeled with inscriptions old as wizardry. "Bat's blood." "Mandrake root." "Deadly nightshade." "Mummy dust." "Corpse fat." And worse. Much worse.

There were shiny new refrigerators in one corner, but they bulged with unnamable carcasses. There were queerly bubbling vats near a small open fire. One long shelf held

alchemic instruments. Jars of herbs stood amidst vials of powdered bones. The floor was crisscrossed with pentagons and zodiacal designs drawn in blue chalk, phosphorescent paint, and some substance that yielded a dull, rusty red.

For just an instant I stood at Professor Keith's side, as the iron door closed behind us. For just an instant my eyes ran their spidery pattern across the red glare and black shadow of that room.

And then something rose out of the farther gloom, something wheeled and scuttled from the darkness, something moved in shroud-white silence across the floor.

I jumped two feet.

"Meet Doctor Ross," said Keith.

"Ulp!" I commented.

"Well, you'd 'Ulp' too if you were dragged into a chamber of horrors and had a zombie come at you and the zombie turned out to be a remarkably attractive young lady. Her blond hair was not marred by any medical severity of coiffure, and her piquant features were very adequately rouged and decorated. Even the white surgical gown did not wholly conceal features which would make any normal man foam at the mouth if he saw her in a sweater.

"Thank you," said Doctor Ross, without embarrassment. "And welcome to Rocklynn Institute. I presume you are interested in witchcraft?"

"If all witches are like you—" I began, but Keith cut me off.

"You aren't being hired to pass out compliments. There's work to do. We've got a demon to raise this afternoon."

I turned around, stared into the grinning visage of a dangling skeleton.

I got my voice back. "Now look here—are you really serious about all this?"

Keith took a sheaf of papers from his pocket and placed them on a table near an inverted crucifix bearing the impaled body of a dried bat. He produced a fountain pen.

"Sign," he ordered.

"Sign what?"

"The contract. Calling for your services as eye-witness for three months. Ten thousand dollars. Five now, five at the conclusion of our experiments. Serious enough for you?"

"Very." My fingers trembled as I scribbled a signature on both sets of contracts.

"Well, then." Keith pocketed the papers. "Are we all ready to proceed, Lily?"

"Everything is in order, Professor," said the girl.

"Then draw the Pentagram," said Keith. "You'll find the blood in the refrigerator still fresh enough. Recite the chant and light the fires, my dear. And don't worry—I'll keep you covered with the revolvers. If anything goes wrong, I'll shoot to kill."

Phillips Keith drew two guns from his vest holster and leveled them into the darkness of the curtained room.

II

Up Pops—

"SILVER bullets in here," explained Professor Keith. "Very good against vampires, werewolves, vrykolas, or ghouls. Don't know how effective they are against a draconibus, though."

"What?"

"A draconibus. Flying cacodemon of the night. Sort of an incubus. If Abbot Richalmus is correct. We're using his spell from *"Liber Revelationum de Insidia et Versutiis Daemonum Adversus Homines."* He says the things are black and scaly, quite human in appearance except for the wings and fangs, but on a low order of intelligence. Something like the elementals. If the bullets don't work, there's always the Pentagram. You know what it is; a five-pointed star, two angles ascendant and one pointed down. It represents Satan, Goat of the Sabbath."

"But it all seems too absurd—mingling science and sorcery."

"Why?" Keith snapped. "Yesterday's magic is today's scientific fact. Vodoo witch doctors and medieval savants tried to cast out demons.

"Today psychiatrists attempt to cure insanity by hypnosis, suggestion, and shock treatments, in almost the same way.

"Once alchemists attempted to transmute base metals into gold. Today that effort constitutes the basis of scientific research along identical lines.

"Are not scientists attempting to find the Elixir of Youth in their laboratories, using animal and human blood in their experiments like the mages of old?

"Don't scientists concern themselves with the vital problems of Life and Death—and keep chicken hearts and dog heads alive when severed from the dead bodies?

"Men died at the stake for that in ages past. They died for dealing with the very mysteries we scientists now openly attempt to probe. Science is sorcery, I tell you—except that in some cases, the ancient wizards might have been more *successful."*

The slim figure of Lily Ross weaved a white pattern across the far side of the black chamber. Flame blossomed in her fingers as she bent over the braziers in the niches and re-kindled their dying fires. From a pouch at her waist she scattered fine dust upon the embers.

The fires flared upward—not red now, but green and blue and purple. A kaleidoscope of diabolic luminance.

Red tongues rose from candle tips and lapped at the darkness. Thick, bloated candles, like the

puffy fingers of a gigantically swollen corpse—thick, bloated candles, fed by a slim white priestess.

White witch!

SHE stooped over and drew a silvery design upon the floor, and its five luminous points were bathed with a crimson fluid poured from a canister.

"Blood," whispered Keith: "Type B blood."

"Type B?"

"Naturally. Didn't I tell you we were using modern scientific methods in witchcraft?"

Keith pointed toward the bookshelves. "It took me years to gather this collection. Manuscripts, parchments, fragments from treatises, secret documents from every country and every age. Much of it is locked away in those files. In cunabula. Cost a small fortune, but worth it."

"But aren't they filled with the same fake gibberish as all the rest?" I objected. "I've read some of that stuff, and it's usually pretty silly."

"True. But there are kernels of truth. It's easy to discern. Some of the spells are known frauds; others are genuine."

"You mean if you read a spell aloud that it might conjure up a ghoul or a ghost?"

"If you read it *correctly,*" answered Keith. "There's the whole point. That's where science steps in.

"In many cases the spell has not been set down completely, due to fear. In other instances, the incantation has certain word changes, due to imperfect translations, or incorrect interpretation of the medieval Latin or Greek. The Church burned as much of the genuine stuff as could be found over centuries of time.

"We've had to spend months of preparation—weeding the genuine from the spurious, piecing together fragments, studying contemporary sources. It's been a lengthy job for Doctor Ross and myself, but we're now assured of one thing—we have on hand nearly one hundred actual, authentic incantations for the evocation of supernatural forces. If spoken correctly, the proper vibrations will be set up as in ordinary prayer, and responses will be made.

"Also, some of these incantations require ceremonies, such as this one. We've spent a goodly sum acquiring the necessary instruments and materials for our experiments. It's hard to buy a Hand of Glory, or baboon's blood; hard to secure enough cadavers. Grisly, too—but important."

I shrugged. "But Class B blood?"

"Merely an illustration of our thoroughness. We're going to attack the supernatural with modern aid. Consider the reasons for the failure of ancient sorcerers.

"For one thing, as I pointed out, many were admitted fakes. And serious students got hold of the wrong

translations, as I have demonstrated. Naturally, they didn't succeed.

"Again, they were balked by lack of proper materials. If the spell called for baboon's blood, they might have had to use the blood of a rhesus monkey, for example. It spoiled the mixture, by simple chemistry.

"Similarly, they often were taken in by frauds. Perhaps they attempted brewing a philtre calling for 'powdered unicorn's horn.' Naturally, when *we* see such a recipe, we throw it out. They weren't so fortunate, and again they failed.

"So there you are. It may look like hocus-pocus to you, but it's the result of applied scientific reasoning. We've sifted our spells, we've checked our formulae, we've gathered together only the most authentic ingredients, we're working by trial and error and modern logic.

"Under such conditions we cannot fail. Surely there is a basis of truth underlying this tremendous mass of legend and theory that is older than any other form of worship. Science has recognized today the pathological existence of the vampire and werewolf and ghoul in mental cases. Science has recognized today many practices which were once called witchcraft. Now we shall take the further step and discover whether the ancients were wiser than we knew.

"Today, using Class B blood, we are performing the Richalmus rune to evoke a draconibus. Doctor Ross has drawn the Pentagram. She has placed the five candles at the points, and fed the fires with the Three Colors.

"Now she will read the invocation in the original Latin. If the conditions are reproduced correctly, we shall soon see the veritable flying daemon of the night which the good Abbot describes so graphically. Mayhap we shall capture it and offer our living proof to the world."

"You'll *capture* it?" I murmured.

Keith pointed at the ceiling. "Of course, if the thing does appear, and is dangerous, I've got the silver bullets to stop it. But I'd much prefer to take my apparitions alive. There's the scientific means."

I followed his directing finger. Suspended by chains in the shadowy heights above was a square sheet of transparent glass.

It hung directly over the spot where the Pentagram gleamed upon the floor.

"Notice the lever at the door," Keith said. "Turn that, and the glass cage drops down. Fits over whatever appears in the circle, fits like a cage."

"But your demon would surely break out of it at once," I said, half-ashamed at even using the word.

"Not from that," Keith assured me. "There are repelling crosses ground into the glass itself—including the crux ansantor. Tubes of holy water in the paneling along the

sides. Besides, it's the modern 'unbreakable' glass, for added precaution, and there's a little tubing at the top which extends inside. It admits air—and it can also admit enough monoxide to turn that glass cage into a lethal chamber within thirty seconds. So if anything appears, just you pull that lever."

So there it was. I stood in the dark chamber as the white witch wove her spell. If it hadn't been for that five thousand dollar check in my pocket, I'd have quit there.

Not because it was silly.

Because it was serious.

Witchcraft! The Black Arts of legend, the hideous whisperings creeping throughout history and leering madly through all barriers of reasons. Satanism, the Black Mass, trafficking with the dead and the masters of the dead.

Here in this room, the reek of the grave. The corpse-fat candles, and the flames that burned with a blue light, a green lividity, a purple pallor. Blood trickling across an ancient symbol on the floor. Silence and darkness, and now a rustling, as Lily Ross took the yellow parchment in her hand and stepped slowly toward the light of the blue brazier.

She stood there, poised and statuesque, a blond handmaiden of Evil. Her red lips shaped the first syllables that broke the utter silence.

Keith's face was pudgy and prosaic in the glare, but his eyes shone with the fanatic zeal of a Puritan warlock.

Sweat beaded my forehead.

"Would you go to hell for ten thousand dollars?"

Here, in this skyscraper tower, I was nearer to hell than I would be in the bowels of the earth.

Here stood the magic circle, the witch, the wizard. Here was the source, the linkage between Man and Mystery.

Lily Ross spoke the first sentences of the incantation.

I thought that her mouth was a scarlet flower, emanating corruption. I thought that her lips were heaven, but her voice was hell. I saw a beautiful young girl, and I heard the withered creaking of a crone.

It can't be explained. There was nothing wrong with her *tone*. It was what she *said*.

The words were Latin, but they didn't seem to be words as much as sounds, and not so much sounds as *vibrations*.

Not college Latin. Not words with meaning in themselves. Not words spoken as sentences. Just sounds, constructed for a purpose. An evil purpose.

I knew that. I knew it as strongly as I knew my own existence.

Lily Ross was reciting an incantation, and for the first time I realized what an incantation meant.

It was a call to a demon.

Now I knew what truth there was in the power of the word. The

word used in prayer, and the word used in black summons.

The drone blended with the blackness. The blackness mingled oddly with the green, the violet, the blue fires.

The Pentagram became a wriggling, phosphorescent serpent, swaying amidst green, purple, and blue words of flame. The shadows droned. The girl burned and flickered.

And then suddenly the pulsing began.

It shook the walls. It rose with the words the girl recited, blended with them, then emerged stronger, triumphant. Smoke spiraled up in a sudden jet from the braziers, as a great wind filled the chamber.

I shook before the icy blast that was not air.

I looked through water at a shimmering, slim figure, a slithering silver line on the floor, a wiggling spiral of colored fires. And then the light came up, the roar came up, the voice came up to a single, sustained note.

"Wake up!"

Somebody was shaking me. It was Keith. Slowly the roaring died away.

I looked around. There was no shimmering. No wind. No noise. Lily Ross—a girl, not a witch—stood silent and dejected.

Keith scowled at me. "We've failed."

"But I felt something—something—"

"Pure self-hypnosis. It didn't work."

Lily Ross stepped over.

"Let me see this copy of the incantation," Keith demanded, wearily. He took the paper from her hand.

"Damnation!"

Lily's eyes widened to a deeper blue. "What's the matter?"

"Matter? Here's a perfect example of what I was trying to explain. You've made a mistake here. This isn't the proper invocation at all. This isn't the Richalmus ritual. It's that other one almost like it—Gorgioso's Invocation of the Devil!"

"How did that happen?" asked the girl. "I could have sworn—"

"I'll do the swearing," snapped Keith. "You've recited the Invocation of the Devil by mistake. No wonder nothing happened!"

He turned to me, but didn't say anything. There was no chance to speak.

For the roaring started again, and this time there was no question of self-hypnosis.

The rumbling shook the room as though the building was clawed by an earthquake. Lily and Professor Keith stood swaying beside me as the wind rose, the flame flared, the thunderous crescendo swept through our bodies, tore at our brains.

Gleaming with lambent fire, the Pentagram writhed at our feet. Within it a black shadow—a black shadow, coalescing, blurring into an

outline—an outline in the Pentagram of Satan, Black Goat of the Sabbath!

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lily Ross's trembling hands move out, saw the crumpled scrap of paper fall from her fingers. It was the parchment from which she had read the incantation—the *wrong* incantation. The one that summoned up the Devil.

And now—a figure stood in the Pentagram!

III
Speak of the Devil

WE STARED, all of us. Lily Ross gave a tiny gasp, lost amidst the crackling of the braziers. Keith was numb. I found myself trembling, unable to lift my hands and shield my eyes from a vision that seared and burned with a flame from the Pit.

The Presence crouched there in the Pentagram, its black goat-face gleaming in the glare of the fires. The shaggy, tousled head with the stumps of goat-horns, the fiendishly familiar visage, the cloaked body —I saw them all, merging into a sharper focus of actuality.

The Presence *gathered* itself as I gazed, as though revelling in the actuality of its new physical existence. Like a child being born and *realizing* it.

But this was no child. There was nothing youthful in the ancient smirk of relish on that ageless face. The fires in those slitted eyes burned long before the gases which created Earth.

The goat-body moved, black arms extended. Claws, talons, call them what you will, emerged swiftly from the cloak.

One foot moved out. Black, misshapen. Hooflike. *Cloven!*

My own feet moved then. Moved in desperate swiftness. As the Presence lumbered forward I raced for the doorway. My outstretched arms tugged frantically at the lever Keith had shown me. I wrenched it down.

From the ceiling the iron chains grated. There was a thunderous crash, and then the great glass cage dropped down squarely over the black body of Satan, Prince of Darkness.

The creature in the cage beat black claws against the glass and suddenly recoiled.

Keith pressed the rheostat. The room blazed up into prosaic outline. Fluorescence turned the darkness to daylight, and we stood in the draped chamber—ordinary figures once more, in an ordinary room.

Except for that glass cage, and the horror it held.

It was bad enough in the firelight, but now the nightmare quality of our captive was accentuated ten-fold.

The black figure stood proudly in the center of the glass enclosure —stood proud as Lucifer. Unbidden, the three of us drew closer.

The monster was shaggy, a goat-headed Aegypan figure with human eyes and mouth. The skin was jet-black, but dull. I stared intently at one gnarled talon—horrified at its microscopic detail and the total absence of visible pores in the skin.

Lily's blue eyes, Keith's gray ones, followed mine.

"It's incredible," muttered the professor. "Just like the mental image I'd formed. "The beard, the mustache, the monocle. And the red skin."

"*Red* skin?" I snapped. "It's black!"

"Scaly!" insisted Lily.

"No scales," I said. "What are you talking about? And what do you mean, monocle? Why, he's like a black goat."

"Are you crazy?" Keith said. "Why anyone can see that he's a man in evening dress with a red face and a monocle."

"What about that forked tail?" asked Lily. "That's the worst."

"No tail at all," I retorted. "You two aren't seeing straight."

Keith stepped back.

"Wait a minute," he protested. "Let's consider this." He cocked his head my way. "You claim you see a sort of black goat, with human features, wearing a cloak?"

I NODDED.

"And you, Lily?"

"A scaly creature with a forked tail. More like a gray lizard."

"And I see a red fiend in evening dress," Keith announced. "Well, we're all correct."

"I don't get it."

"Don't you understand? No one really knows what the Devil looks like. Each of us has his own mental picture, drawn from imaginative illustrations in books. Throughout known history, Satan has been pictured in several ways by his worshippers and enemies. To some he appeared as the Goat of the Sabbath, the primitive fiend of the oriental nomads, the Father of Lies known to the Bible.

"To others he is essentially the incarnation of the Tempter, the Serpent. To moderns, he is the red gentleman. We three each visualize him in our own way, and the focal thought of millions throughout the ages materializes him in whichever aspect seems most natural to the beholder.

"We're all looking at the same figure. We all see different concepts. What he really looks like, we cannot say. Our thoughts give him the material body."

"You may be right," Lily hazarded.

"Why not? I don't want to blaspheme, but does anyone know what Christ really looked like? No—all we have to go by is the standard concept, which was invented by medieval painters. And yet, He is always pictured in one way, and we have come to think of Him in that way.

"We couldn't see Him in any

other form. So it is with the Enemy."

"That's all very interesting," I interrupted. "But do you know what would happen if the world learned that we had—him captive in this room? Can't you see the panic, the madness that would be loosed on earth?"

"He won't get loose," Keith barked. "Are you a coward, man? Can't you see that here, in this very room, we hold a proof of witchcraft, a proof of the existence of the supernatural, of evil?"

"I agree with you about evil," I answered. "And I'm afraid. He who sups with the devil must have a long spoon."

"You talk like—"

"A priest," I finished again. "And perhaps they are wiser than you scientists think. They have been fighting this creature here for long centuries, and their wisdom should be heeded."

"Why, you said yourself that you matched wits with the Devil and beat him," Keith protested. "We, with the weapons of scientific research at our command, are going to study our guest. Why, we'll give him a blood test, we'll examine the skin, we'll isolate cells under the microscope, we'll use the X-ray, we'll —"

I turned away. It was madness.

"Maybe the creature can speak. What about an intelligence test? We'll get our dope from the staff. Take pictures."

"You'd think it was some new sort of guinea-pig. But I didn't. Not when I saw the black body crouching there, huddled up away from the cross-etched glass, but with flaming evil in its eyes. They had the Devil in a cage, and they wanted his fingerprints!

"Success!" Keith trumpeted. "Success beyond the wildest dreams of man. We'll conduct a scientific study of all evil—of incarnate evil."

He stood beside the glass enclosure, gesturing like a circus barker.

"Behold the Great God Pan! Yes, and behold the Serpent, the Tempter, the Fallen Angel! Behold Satan, Lucifer, Bellzebub, Azriel, Asmodeus, Sammael, Zamiel, Prince of Darkness and Father of Lies! Gaze on the Black Goat of the Sabbath, gaze on fabled Ahriman, on Set, Typhon, Malik Tawis, Abaddon, Yama, Primal Nodens, the archetype of evil, known to all men by all names!"

I felt the urge of hysterical laughter. This was too much. Only the girl saved me.

"Let's get out of here," she suggested. "At once. We've had a shock. Tomorrow we can sit down and reason this thing out clearly, if we're not crazy already. We can make plans sensibly then. Let's rest."

"You're right. I'm sure that—he—will be safe behind the glass. And this room is locked, sealed. No one must suspect."

Keith moved toward the door and we followed. He snapped out the light as the door opened, plunged the room into Stygian night.

We went out. I looked back once. There was nothing but blackness, and two red coals burning. Eyes. Eyes in the darkness. The eyes of Satan. The eyes that saw Faust.

IV
Hell Breaks Loose

SO THAT'S my story," I concluded. "Now, what's yours?"

Lily Ross raised her glass. "Just a little astro-physics and bio-chemistry," she smiled. "A job at Rocklynn as Keith's assistant."

"Don't kid me. You're a blonde in a green evening dress, the prettiest girl in this supper club. And you're going to dance with me, because you never heard of chemistry or physics, but you can La Conga all night."

She could, too. One whirl around the floor convinced me. I had the Devil by the tail and Lily Ross in my arms, and I was sitting on top of the world tonight.

But when we got back to our table, Lily sobered for a moment. She said, "I'm worried about Professor Keith. That excitement today unnerved him. Hope he's going to be all right tomorrow. He went home in a taxi and went to bed."

"Calm yourself, Lily," I said. "If he isn't all right tomorrow, he'll

merely be suffering from a hangover."

"What do you mean?"

"Take a squint at that table near the orchestra," I grinned. "If Keith got in a taxi he wasn't going home."

Lily took her squint, and then her eyes went wide. "Why, he's here—and he's with a woman!"

"That's putting it mildly," I told her. "He's got a woman and a half there. It's Eve Vernon, the singer in *On the Beam*. Never thought he was such a man-about-town."

"He isn't!" Lily gasped. "Why, he never goes anywhere at all. I've never heard of him escorting a woman. And that's champagne on his table, too. Why—"

"Live and learn," I said. "He's just relaxing, that's all. Shall we join him?"

"Certainly not. It might embar-

rass him. Besides, there's something strange about this—"

I shrugged, but subsequent events bore me out. Keith was relaxing to a point where it was necessary to bear him out. He danced. He drank two quarts of champagne, solo. He laughed. He reddened. He tried to dance with the girls in the floor show.

When Lily and I slipped out he was singing drunkenly at the top of his lungs.

"Disgusting," Lily said.

"Forget it," I advised.

I forgot it in her good-night kiss. I forgot everything. All I knew was that tomorrow, at ten o'clock, she would be waiting down at Rocklynn.

She was. I entered the outer lobby and took her arm.

"Where's the professor?" I asked

"He didn't show up."

"He *must* a hangover, then! Did you call him?"

"Certainly. His housekeeper says he hasn't been in all night."

"Strange. What shall we do?"

"Let's go into the laboratory and wait. We must inspect our—specimen."

Lily led the way down the hall, to the barred doorway. She fumbled with a key.

"Why—it's open!"

We entered.

The room was dark, and only a single brazier burned. A single brazier, and the red eyes in the glass cage.

A figure huddled before the cage.

"Keith!"

I shook him. He struggled to his feet.

Keith's face was haggard, his clothing rumpled. He spoke thickly, as though half-asleep.

"Better get home and get some rest," Lily suggested. "We'll stay here. If you feel up to it this afternoon, we can make our plans then."

Suddenly the Professor drew himself up. He seemed to visibly shake off his fatigue.

"Nonsense! I'm all right. Feel splendid, perfectly splendid. But no time for a conference, my dear. I've got to find Considine. Need more money from him, at once. You stay here, keep your eyes open. See you tonight at the Test Tube Ball. I'll arrange to meet Considine there, and some of his friends."

He was gone. Lily's mouth was a red oval of astonishment.

"Test Tube Ball?" I repeated.

"Yes. Society masquerade. Patrons of Rocklynn Institute hold it every year. Collect funds there, you know. But what does Keith want at such a gathering? He never dances or goes in for social affairs."

"You forget last night."

"That's just the point—I can't forget last night. That Professor isn't well, I'm sure of it. Something has happened."

"He isn't the only one who isn't well," I said softly. "Look into the glass."

Lily turned and we surveyed the cage together.

Satan squatted, half-slumping, on the floor. The red eyes flickered, but they were suddenly fainter in their fire.

"Sick?" Lily murmured.

"No air—or no food. What does His Majesty eat?" I began. But something about the aspect of the creature cut me short.

"I wish Keith were here," said Lily. "We ought to do something."

We peered into the glass.

Suddenly Satan opened his eyes. He sat up and stared back. All at once he rose to his feet, stepped forward. His upraised claws almost touched the glass, but not quite. The gesture was one of appeal.

And in those eyes I read not hate, but—recognition!

Lips curled, disclosing yellowed fangs. They moved silently behind the glass.

"He's trying to talk to us!" Lily gasped. "I'm sure of it!"

"Watch!"

The black fiend was gesturing wildly. Its eyes rested on Lily's face.

"If we could only find out—"

"No use."

Evidently it was true. His Unholiness suddenly slumped to rest once again on the floor, head buried in the long black arms.

We stared at one another for a long moment.

Once more there was activity within the cage. The creature had bent down on its knees over the floor. One claw held a tiny sliver. With a start, I recognized it. It was chalk—the phosphorescent stuff used to draw the Pentagram with. And the Devil was writing!

From time to time eyes rested on our faces in a strange appeal. The bony fingers continued to move: slowly, painfully.

Letters traced upon the floor. Words. Sentences. And then it was done.

"Turn out the flame of the brazier," Lily whispered. "Then we can read it."

I clicked it off, plunged the room into utter darkness. I advanced through that darkness to her side, stared into the dim glow on the floor. A glow that brightened.

Letters. Letters of fire. Silver fire on the floor. I read the words.

"Quickly! Stop him before it's too late. He got into me this morning and I know what he means to do."

That's when I gasped.

I gasped again at the sight of the two words beneath the message. They were a signature.

"Phillips Keith," I read. Letters of silver fire in my brain.

Lily was shaking at my side. I pulled her to her feet.

"Come on," I said.

"Where?"

"After the Professor, of course. We're going to the Test Tube Ball."

V
The Devil Dances

THERE WAS no dancing in mind for us tonight. Not if what we suspected were true. It might have been cunning on the thing's part—the cunning of a fiend. But anything was possible in a world gone mad. We had the Devil in a cage. Who in this room would believe that?

I smiled grimly at the thought. Suppose His Hellishness should walk suddenly into this very ballroom?

I imagined the screaming, the dismay, the horror. They'd dance to a different tune if *that* happened!

But—*it did.*

Lily and I stood by the door waiting. We'd been there for ten minutes, ever since our arrival, eyes scanning the dancers for a glimpse of Keith. He was on his way, the housekeeper had said, when our frantic call had come through. He should be here now, any minute. So we stood there, and Satan walked in.

It was Keith, of course, in a Mephistopheles disguise. Red suit, false beard and mustache. But he'd added a grisly touch. Red chalk on face and hands. *His* concept of Satan.

I had never realized he was so tall. Tall and slender. He looked the part, looked it too well.

We weren't the only ones to notice it. The orchestra had just finished a number, and the crowded hall was a perfect setting for his entrance. He came down three stairs, and all at once the conversation seemed to die away. Women stopped talking, and the fat paws of business men tightened about their cigars as Phillips Keith walked into the room.

My mind shuttled back in memory to a similar scene. Red Death! That was it—Lon Chaney as Red Death in *The Phantom of the Opera!* It terrified me as a child, and now my spine tingled anew. Phillips Keith as Satan, Master of Evil.

"What a disguise!"

"Perfect!"

"Even the club foot!"

I could have choked the thin matron who said that. She would have to call *that* to my attention. The tingling in my spine became a pulsation of dread.

For Phillips Keith limped.

"Dropped something on his foot," Lily whispered. "He must have—"

Club foot. Or cloven hoof?

The red figure of Mephistocles stalked through the parted lane. Proudly he walked, despite the limp. Proud as Lucifer.

I saw him beckon to a stout man in pirate costume.

"Considine," said Lily, dully. "That's Thomas Considine."

Keith said a few words. Considine appeared to be laughing, commenting on the disguise. He walked at the Professor's side, then beck-

oned to a companion. The party moved toward a side door.

At that moment the orchestra struck up. Dancing started once more, conversation rose suddenly, and the red-clad Mephisto and his two companions disappeared from the floor.

I grabbed Lily's wrist and jostled through the crowd. "Hurry," I cried. "Something's up!"

We reached the door just as the red cloak whisked into the elevator. The door closed, the car moved down.

"Stairs!"

Three flights down in nothing, flat. The red cloak flicked tantalizingly out of the lobby.

We reached the street just as the black car rolled away.

Heaven sent a taxi around the corner.

"Follow that car—" I began. Then, "To blazes with that! Just take us to Rocklynn Foundation. I know where they're going."

Lily knew, too. We didn't say anything, just stared at each other, and I'm afraid my eyes were as frightened as hers.

Hurtling down the black, gaping mouths of midnight streets, riding the wind behind the red cloak of Satan—this wasn't New York, but a scene set in medieval nightmare.

As we paused before the door marked *Private,* we heard a voice. It too was filtered through a black dream. Keith's voice—partly.

I don't like to admit that it was only *partly* Keith's voice, but what else can one say? It was a voice coming from his throat, using his larynx, but there was a deep, buring overtone that was altogether unnatural in any human throat.

Maybe Keith had a cold. That's why he sounded that way. But cold or no cold, I couldn't help hearing what he *said.* That was by far the worst of all.

Whispering huskily from that black room—

"So now you see what I have accomplished, gentlemen. You, Considine, and you, Mr. Wintergreen, can no longer doubt the evidence of your own senses."

"But it's monstrous!" Considine boomed. "The Devil in a cage!"

"Monstrous, you say? Glorious! Don't you see the possibilities here?"

"I suppose it's all very interesting scientifically, but what do you intend to do—exhibit this creature to the public or something of the sort?"

Keith laughed. "Considine, you talk like a fool. Can't you realize we have something here that can become the most powerful force on earth?"

"Powerful?" interrupted the nasal tones of Wintergreen.

"Yes, all-powerful. Consider, gentlemen, for a moment, what our captive can mean to us. Have you ever heard of the Black Mass, of the worship of Satan?

"For centuries men have gath-

ered to pay homage to the Devil. Believing that the Kingdom of Heaven is ruled by God, they claim that earth is ruled by Satan, and choose to worship him. If he grants them happiness here on earth, they are willing to forsake celestial joys."

"What utter rot!"

THE VOICE droned on, contemptuous of the interruption. "They meet in hidden places—the cellars of ancient houses or ruined churches—on Walpurgis Eve and other unhallowed nights. Candles, fashioned from the corpse-fat of unbaptized infants, light their devotions to the Prince of Darkness. An unfrocked priest presides over the altar; the altar which is the naked, living flesh of a woman.

"Then, as the Lord's Prayer is recited in reverse, a parody of the Mass is held. The Mass of St. Secaire, the unholy ritual of Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade. A sacrifice is given to Satan, and celebrants drink of a red wine which is truly human blood. All do homage to the Father of Evil, who grants them then their dark desires."

"Don't talk like that," Wintergreen begged, in nervous protest. "We're not children, to be frightened by bogey-men."

"Neither are the thousands of secret Satanists who carry on these rites."

"And I'm not offering you a bogey-man. I'm offering you the actual physical entity of the Fallen Angel, the Master of the Great Black Lodge.

"That's why I brought you here and showed you our captive. Your money enabled me to summon him. It is only fitting now that you be given the opportunity to profit thereby."

The droning voice held cunning. Devilish cunning. Lily grasped my wrist.

"We have here the opportunity for power. For undreamt of wealth. We, and we alone, are the masters of Satan. Let me tell you my plan.

"I shall become the High Priest of the Satanists. You, Considine, and you, Wintergreen, shall go out among your friends and proselyte. Bring the rich old women, the eccentric old men into the fold. Bring them to the Black Mass, spread the word that a new day is at hand for those who would pay the price to the Powers of Darkness. Tell them that there are ways to obtain eternal youth, ways to obtain more wealth, ways to wreak revenge.

"We can control nations, master the earth!"

"Have you gone crazy, Keith?" Considine's voice trembled. "Are you utterly mad? First you show up in a Mephisto costume, then you bring us to look at this freak, this animal hybrid of yours, and now you babble insanities."

"Yes," Wintergreen amended, weakly. "I'm getting out of here."

"No you don't. You know the secret."

I don't know what I intended to do. I only realized that there would never be a better cue for my entrance.

I flung the door open and marched in, Lily Ross at my side.

Considine and Wintergreen stared with open mouths. In the glass cage beyond, the black figure gestured frantically in the red glow of the braziers.

I ignored them all. I had eyes only for Keith—for the man in the red cloak, the man with the red face and the spade beard.

As he turned to face me, I read his eyes, read the blazing message there. His hands swooped up, claw-like, as I charged.

Sheer instinct drove me on; the same instinct that guides a man to crush a wriggling serpent, even though he knows it is about to strike.

Lily screamed as my hands closed about Keith's scarlet throat, rose to rake his face. I almost screamed as I felt that face.

I was tearing at his disguise, at his false beard. Tearing and tearing—and it wouldn't come off.

For Professor Phillips Keith was *not* distinguished at all. He was Satan in red flesh!

The dragging club-foot, the cloven hoof moved up, butting my thighs. The claws razored my chest. The deep growling from the creature's throat welled horribly.

Considine and Wintergreen, Lily and the creature in the cage whirled crazily by. Red arms encircled me, and began to crush.

To crush and break. Pudgy little arms bent me back while I felt my spine bending like a white-hot wire of pain. Pudgy little arms—but they held strength. *The strength of a demon.*

Demon arms crushing. Demon breath searing my face. Demon face glaring into my own. My senses ebbed, and a chuckling rose from the grinning thing that crushed me like a rag-doll, crushed me down into darkness.

I tore my lef hand free, somehow; got it up to my pocket. I wrenched the flask out, ripped the cork with frantic fingers. The creature grabbed for my arm, twisted it, but the flask was open. I jerked it up.

A white stream spurted against the red face. With a howl of agony, the thing's arms flew up to shield its head. Breaking free, I spattered more of the fluid on the head and shoulders. Rocking on its feet a moment, the creature staggered, fell to its knees. A hideous stench arose.

As the thing fell, I was upon it. I tore the hands from the ravaged face, for there was no strength in those red talons now. I jammed the flask up against the pain-contorted mouth, tilted it. The liquid gushed forth, gurgled down the crimson maw.

In a moment it was over. I rose and faced the three at my side. Lily sobbed.

"I—I thought it would kill you," she gasped. "Until you threw the acid in its face."

"Acid?" I echoed. "Acid, hell—*that was holy water!*"

VI
Getting Behind Satan

"THE HOLY water did it." It was Professor Phillips Keith who spoke—spoke weakly, through ashen lips—but spoke, and in a voice unmistakably his own. Considine and Wintergreen knelt at his side, propping up his head.

It had taken ten minutes to bring him around. At first we had thought the red thing dead—and it was Lily who noticed the *change,* and pointed it out with a murmur of astonishment.

The redness of the skin faded out, slowly. The contours of the body altered subtly, almost before our eyes.

When we saw Professor Phillips Keith lying on the floor in an incongruous red cloak, when we saw his eyelids flutter weakly, some measure of composure returned. By the time the familiar, "What happened?" came faintly from his lips, we were prepared to answer. I told him the story.

"Yes, it was the holy water, all right," he repeated, shuddering. "Pure inspiration on your part to think of it."

"Pure desperation," I corrected.

"I must have been pretty bad."

"You were—evil," Lily interjected slowly. "Utterly evil."

"But what does it all mean?" Considine asked.

"It means that I was possessed of the devil."

"Do you really believe—"

"You saw me," Keith continued. "It was a clear case of what the ancients called *demoniac possession.* From Bible times down, literature and history is filled with recorded instances of men and women who were 'possessed.' Such a condition overtook me.

"I don't know how it started. When we evoked that thing in the cage, I suppose. The shock of our success weakened my mental resistance. The barriers went down in a wave of enthusiasm. You remember my harangue before the glass, don't you?" Keith turned to me.

I nodded.

"That night I came back. I wanted another look at our captive. I got it—guess I got too much. The creature hypnotized me. I didn't know. I looked at it and I became *elated.* I felt exhilarated, half-intoxicated. What religious maniacs describe, and what the old priests of Pan used to call—*ecstasy.*

"After that night I came back. I came back at dawn, under a compulsion born of intoxication and the inner urge upon me. I came back to stare at the creature in the rage, stare at the red eyes in the darkness which glistened like two distant

whirling worlds of evil. Two distant worlds that came closer, merged and blended with our own world, blended with my own brain. You and Lily found me asleep beside the cage this morning. The change had occurred."

I told Keith about our experience with the strangely cowed creature in the cage.

"Part of me must have entered into it when it took my body," he said gravely. His face clouded again. "My body! By nightfall it wasn't my body any more. The leg dragged. I seemed to know what was happening, but I didn't care. I had this ecstasy, this force, driving me.

"I went to the ball, and you know the rest."

There was silence. Somehow Considine's muttered "Incredible!" sounded mawkish and inappropriate.

"Professor, you should get some

rest," said Lily. "The shock—I think it would be best if you spent a few days in the hospital until—"

A white hand waved.

"I can't, my dear. I can't. Don't you see? We have *him* to deal with."

The hand leveled toward the glass cage. Our eyes followed.

The slumping figure behind the glass was gone. In its place once more was Satan, Lord of the Sabbath. Black, erect, and menacing, with the yellow, rotted fangs sneering in malignant fury. There was no mistaking the hate, the thwarted desire in those burning eyes. Considine and Wintergreen saw it for the first time.

They breathed through their mouths hoarsely.

Yes, Satan was back. Satan waited again, waited to spring.

"We thought we had him trapped, but you see—we haven't," Keith whispered. "He has found the way to get out. He can take possession of the human body and walk the earth as a man. For a day or so, anyway. Then the human body changes and the man becomes outwardly, as well as inwardly, the image of Evil. We must get rid of him once and for all. We must!"

"Take it easy," I said. "We understand."

"But you don't understand, you can't." Keith shuddered. "I'll never rest until we've found a way to send him back to Hell."

"You'll rest. Lily and I will get to work, I promise you." The girl nodded agreement.

"Send him back," Keith whispered. "Send him back before—"

The gray head slumped.

"He's passed out," Wintergreen said.

"Good! Phone for an ambulance. We'll carry him out to the lobby. He needs hospital attention."

We carried Keith out, carried the plan out.

Lily and I faced the two industrialists.

"Not a word of this now, to anyone," I cautioned. "We alone share the secret, and we alone must solve it. Keith was right. We must find a way to send this foul, evil creature back."

"I still can't believe it," Wintergreen said. Considine scowled in perplexity.

"Neither do I, but I can feel it, all right. I don't pretend to understand all you've told me, but I know that you're right. It's a mistake to pry into these things. Send that thing back to wherever it came from, use any method you want, and charge the bill to me."

"You'll keep silence?" I reiterated.

"We will." Considine walked heavily toward the door. Suddenly the big man turned.

His beefy face worked with unwonted emotion.—"And may God help you in the task," he said softly to us, and left.

VII
Devil May Care

"ANY LUCK?" I asked dully.

"No," the girl sighed. She rose from the desk, one slim hand brushing back the golden cascade of her hair. "I'm afraid it's no use. There are no formulae here to get rid of him."

"But there has to be one," I insisted. "There must be a way to send him back."

"Not by incantation." Her hopeless glance met mine. For a moment we stood together—then turned, by common impulse, to the glass cage in the center of the room.

Black, brooding, baleful, the Goat of the Sabbath crouched on the floor. The leering, beady eyes rested scornfully on our own. Yellowed fangs menaced in a derisive grin.

Lily shivered. "Can he hear us?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter. He knows. He's waiting, too."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Darling, we can't go on like this forever. It's been two days already. We can't keep on hiding it always—and if anyone should suspect—"

"There must be a way out!" I scowled, my eyes searching the room restlessly.

"Wait a minute. I've got it!"

"What?"

"Didn't Professor Keith say something about tubing in the glass cage? Something about lethal gas?"

"You're right!" Lily's smile became animated. "That tank over there under the table—it's got the tubing attached. We just plug into the panel at the side, and the gas is released. Hand-pump. Come on, I'll show you."

We did the job. It wasn't easy to brave the ghoulish stare of the creature in the cage as my hands fumbled with the nozzle of the hose and screwed it into place.

It was easier to feel the reassuring firmness of the efficient hand-pump handle, once things were in readiness.

"I hope it works," Lily whispered.

"It must work. We have to kill this thing somehow," I answered. "Here goes."

I pumped.

There was a hissing, the inflated tube writhed like a serpent. I watched the nozzle in the panel.

A cloudy vapor poured into the glass enclosure.

I pumped harder, as the black figure vanished suddenly in a whirl of poisonous fog.

The pump sighed emptily.

Together we advanced toward the clouded glass pane.

"See anything?" I asked.

"No. Not yet." Lily pressed her forehead against the glass of the cage, wrinkled it in straining scrutiny. "No—wait a minute. The smoke is clearing."

"Clearing? There's nowhere for it to go!"

"But it is!"

And it was. Even as we watched, the white vapor thinned into spirals, shreds, cumulae.

Behind it crouched the black, goatish body.

Crouched, not slumped.

Satan was alive! And yet the gases cleared—*because he was inhaling them!*

Malignant, triumphant, the black goat pranced. Its eyes shone with evil merriment, with a sort of added animation.

"He thrives on the stuff," Lily sighed. "Now what?"

"Water," I said.

The details don't matter. We used the same tubing, and a new pump. Filled the glass enclosure to the brim. Enough water to drown anything inside.

He absorbed it, of course.

I was afraid to try an arc-welder.

"You can't kill the Devil with fire," Lily told me.

We were back to where we started.

"Give me another day," Lily said. "I'll find an incantation. There must be something here. Some variant on a spell for casting out demons, perhaps. Just put a twist on it. We must get one."

"I must get some sleep," I added. And meant it.

"Go home," commanded the girl.

"And leave you here alone with that? Not on your life! Remember what happened to Keith."

"Well, go into the private office down the hall and take a nap. There's a couch there. I'll keep on working."

"I don't know," I said, slowly.

"I'll be all right. I won't even look at our friend here. Besides, you know what Keith said. He was almost out on his feet, his mental barriers were down. I'm no push-over. Go ahead now, run along and get your rest. I'll promise to get out of here in an hour or so."

"I left the room. Lily Ross sat down, ran her hands through her golden hair, and opened the black book on the desk. In the dancing light of the braziers she looked as she had when I first saw her—like a white witch.

She *was* a white witch in my dreams.

VIII
Hell Hath No Fury—

SHE WAS only a girl when she awakened me.

I grinned sheepishly through a shroud of sleep.

"Sorry. Guess I broke my promise and overslept. Didn't know I was so tired."

"You were tired, darling. Know how long you've been sleeping?"

"No."

"Three hours."

"Really?"

"Uh huh. Feel better now?"

"Certainly. I'm ready for anything. What about you?"

"Still bright." She looked it, too. Her eyes sparkled with gaiety.

"You look as though you had some luck. Find anything?" I asked.

"Well—yes and no. There's a chant in the Prinn *Saracenic Rituals* relating to djin and efreet that could be used, I think. But the German translation is bad. I'm going to check it against the Latin."

"Now?"

"No, silly. Tomorrow. Now I'm going to relax. And you're going to relax with me. Let's go out and take in the town tonight; forget all about this crazy business."

"Don't you think you'd be better off if you went home and rested, Lily?"

"No." Her eyes met mine. "It's dark, and I don't like the dark. It makes me think too much. It makes me dream about—*him.* Don't you see? I want light, people, something to make me forget."

The suggestion was pleasant. Alluring. Alluring, as Lily was. She did sparkle. Her golden hair, the scarlet of her lips, the turquoise of her eyes—all seemed accentuated by inner fire. She slipped one arm in mine, possessively. I felt a tingling as her bare flesh met my wrist. We swept into the outer lobby of Rocklynn. I almost laughed.

Here was a crowd of bustling, officious clerks and directors. White-coated chemists stepped briskly in and out of the long series of offices along the further corridors. Well-dressed visitors and patrons—giggling stenographers—bearded doctors—a typical *Kildare* atmosphere about the place.

They didn't suspect what was going on in the private chamber down the hall. They didn't suspect that the golden girl on my arm was a white witch.

Again that white witch thought had crossed my mind. White witch. Why did I think of Lily that way? Ah, she was a pretty girl—nothing more.

"Supper?" I said. She nodded.

We glided down to the lobby, stepped into a cab. She snuggled close. I liked it.

But when I looked at her again, the semi-darkness of the cab's interior had wrought another change.

She wasn't a white witch any more. Her hair seemed darker. The golden tint was gone. The locks were almost brunette; brown with darker tones.

The scarlet of her lips had turned to rose. A trick of late afternoon light.

IT WAS twilight in the taxi.

And Lily's hair was gray. Not gray, exactly, and not platinum. There was a bluish tint. Her lips were purple.

Her lips were purple—or I was crazy.

Seeing things. A girl who changed in light and shadow. What was that? White witch—black witch—blue witch. What did they

call it? Adaptation. Chamelon. The attribute of a sorceress.

Circe had that power.

But Lily Ross?

Here she was, laughing away, affectionate and alluring. And I was picturing her as an enchantress. Ridiculous.

Well, it was best forgot. I did forget as we entered the supper club. But when we sat down under the red drapes I saw her titian locks flame forth in evil glory, saw her tawny skin glow, saw the crimson depths of her eyes.

Red witch now!

"Let's dance."

I held the red witch in my arms, held a living flame close. Held her closer than I had ever held her, and felt her respond. Her response was flame.

That fire engulfed me. I was tired of toying with the incredible. I went down into the warmth—the warmth of her glowing hair, the warmth of her eyes, the red glow of her mouth.

Her words no longer mattered. I was consumed by the flame of her nearness. The red, swift flame, coursing through my blood and being.

She opened the door. I stepped in. We embraced in the darkness for a long moment.

Then, "I've waited for this," she murmured. "You and I, together. We're going to do wonderful things.

"You mean down at Rocklynn?" I asked lazily.

"Oh—*that!*" she laughed. "That's child's play. It has no real meaning at all."

"Well—"

"You and I were meant for greater destinies." Her voice, vibrant in velvet darkness, had a new quality of its own. A *dark* quality. Peculiarly, I wondered what she looked like here. What color was her hair? And those lips, that now burned mine?

Lips that burned away my questions.

"Greater destinies," she whispered. "You've the brains. I have the beauty."

Did you ever have a woman make love to you with lips and arms while she talked like a bank director? It's an unnerving experience.

"Yes, we'll go a long way together. Keith's out of it, of course. We have the power now. The power to command. With those spells and incantations there are no heights we cannot achieve.

"I could be a queen—"

Well, it was enough. Lips or no lips, I knew. The shudder that ran through me could not be repressed. The voice was Lily's but the thoughts were the Devil's.

I knew what I held in my arms now.

Her arms pressed closer, her body moulded to mine, her warmth sought to drown my dread, and I felt her mouth seek mine.

It pushed her back. She sensed

it, but suddenly embraced me. Again her mouth neared. I felt it graze my lips and then—Lily Ross bent in the darkness, and with the fury of a tigress, locked her teeth in my throat!

IX
Devil's Bargain

AS THE tiny, pointed fangs met, I shook her free.

A feline growl rose in her throat. Her panting breath rasped as her hands raked my face.

I had to do it.

Just a short uppercut to the chin and she slumped to the floor. I stepped over, switched on the lights, and carried her limp body to the sofa.

She lay there, eyes closed, a golden witch under lamplight. From her bruised mouth ran a tiny crimson trickle.

The sleeping sorceress—

I got cold water, a towel, brandy. It took three minutes before her eyes fluttered open. By that time I'd been in her bedroom and found what I was seeking. So when her eyes did open, they focussed directly on the bronze crucifix held before them.

A look of pain seared her face. She writhed.

"No—take it away—please—"

I held her twisting body taut.

"Look!" I commanded.

"No—you fool—let me go—I can't—"

The crucifix pressed closer. I placed the cool metal against her forehead.

She screamed.

I drew it off and stared at the livid welt—the imprint of the cross burned into her white flesh.

Perspiration beaded my brow, but I didn't desist. I knew what had to be done. Exorcism. The casting out of demons.

First Keith, and now Lily. She had to be freed.

Her moanings ceased. I waved the crucifix before her and whispered.

"Lily, darling. Look at the cross. Look at it. I know it hurts, but you must look. I won't burn you with it. Just look. Look and sleep. Try to sleep, Lily. You're tired, so very tired. So tired. Sleep. And look at the cross. Sleep."

Science and witchcraft, eh? Well, let's see what a little modern hypnotism will do.

The light glittered on the weaving outline. Her eyes followed it, her ears heard my murmurs.

Lily slept.

MY SHIRT was wet clear through. I was trembling. But she slept. And I kept whispering. "Lily, come back! Lily fight it. Come back. Lily, come back."

The tremors came then. Convulsions. I saw her writhe in agony and still I didn't stop. Didn't dare stop.

She moaned, and it wasn't her

voice. Her hands darted like talons to her temples, as though to tear away the scar. Her face was the worst—changing from pallor to deep flush.

But my voice was winning. I felt that. Her whimpers grew weaker. She slept under the cross, accepted the vision.

The force within her waned, then blazed in a final access of fury. That's when my hand trembled so that I nearly dropped the crucifix. When her face began to look like *other* faces.

They bubbled up from beneath her flesh, those malignant expressions of hate and rage. The expressions seen on the faces of the schizophrenic, the demented. The faces of madness.

They came now, grinning their defiance. And the voice and the cross fought them, fought them from her being.

At the end she slept, and I slumped beside her. The crucifix rested against her bare arm, but it no longer burned. I had won.

In the morning's awakening we made our decision. I told her what she didn't know—and she told me what I had guessed; about the "dizzy spells" she had experienced while working alone in the chamber.

"I'm going back there," I insisted. "You need rest. I'll carry on alone, and I'm forewarned as well as forearmed by what you and Keith have gone through. I won't succumb, I promise you—not until I've found a way to get rid of His Satanic Majesty once and for all."

"Be careful, darling—"

I smiled grimly. It has to be done. That menace must be removed quickly. If you or Keith had been allowed to continue it might spread like a plague. There's no choice in the matter. Either we get rid of Satin or he gets rid of us. That's the bargain."

"You'll call me regularly?"

"Of course. And in a day or two both you and Keith can come down again to help. But now—I'm going back to hell."

Lily smiled. "May God be with you," she whispered.

X
Powers of Darkness

THAT NIGHT we worked alone, the Devil and I.

The Devil and I, in that black tower. The red braziers burned as a beacon, but the red glare from his eyes blazed a still stronger warning.

All alone in the dark room, behind locked doors. A crouching fiend in a cage. A crouching man at a table.

From time to time the ebon monstrosity reared ponderously to pad back and forth behind the barrier. From time to time I rose and paced the floor with equal restlessness.

Frequently a malignant scowl

convulsed the black and bony face. Often, I too, scowled.

I turned the yellowed pages of a dozen bulky books. I scanned handwriting. But learning the mantic arts is a grim business. No wonder wizards grew gray!

Here was White Magic—the nine steps in the evocation of angels. The command of the Seven Stewards of Heaven; Arathron, Bethor, Phaleg, Och, Hazith, Ophiel, and Phul. White Magic, and a jumble of theosophical arcanum which would be of no use here. Wrong lead.

Black Magic—ashes of hosts and dried toads—unguents of grease and blood of corpses heated over human bones—burning crucifixes—gibberish.

Red Magic? The highest esoteric art was never written or told. Nothing here.

Try divination.

I tried divination for hours. Long hours in the black room.

Long hours under hell-spawned eyes. Eyes that watched me as I studied. Eyes that seemed to pierce me as I studied. Eyes that seemed to pierce the glass cage, to peer over my shoulder as I read.

The file on divination was huge. Could I evoke an omen, a clue? Divination—

There was aeromancy, alectryomancy, aleuromancy, alphitomancy—but I had neither wind nor rooster, flour nor hard dough.

Aminiomancy? Use the caul of a newborn child? No. And the horrid anthropomancy—prophecy by use of human entrails—no, again.

Arithomancy, Astragalomancy. Both mathematical tricks, long since discredited. Axinomancy and Belomancy were relics of the old "trial by ordeal" of Saxon days.

Capnomancy? Divination by smoke-wreaths from a drug-sprinkled fire? Hashish visions. A fake.

Cephalonomancy, Dactyliomancy, Gastromancy, Geomancy, Gyromancy. I had no donkey's head to sprinkle with live coals, no

finger ring, no gift at ventriloquism, nor was I a sand-diviner.

Oh, sure. Sorcery is so fascinating, until you analyze it.

Hippomancy, the Celtic trick with white horses. Out.

Hydromancy, Ichthyomancy, Lampodomancy, Lithomancy, Margaritomancy, Myomancy, Onomancy, Onychomancy, Oomancy, Parthenomancy.

Fine stuff! All superstitious nonsense, though the last—divination by employing a virgin—might prove entertaining.

Spondonomancy, Sycomancy, Theomancy.

That was the end of divination.

And still Satin stared, I was becoming more and more conscious of that stare. Satan grinned. The grin burned through me. I'd find a way! I had to.

There was no sleep for me that day, and it was almost midnight when I blundered back into the notebooks and hit the section on *Elementals.*

Elementals. The primitive spirits.

The gnomes inherent in earth own the kingdom of the North, and they exert the melancholic influence over the temperament of man. Their sign is the Bull, and they are commanded by the Magic Sword. Their sovereign is Gob.

Spells to command them, written in Lily Ross's handwriting. Taken from the tomes. Precise directions for mixing incense, and drawing figures, and reciting commands.

"There are nearly a hundred proven spells and incantations. "A pinch of salt and a tablespoonfull of butter. Bake well under low flame."

Not exactly. These recipes might affect the stomach, but only with a nausea of dread. "A pinch of ground bone, and a cup of blood. Place under the fires of Hell."

I was light-headed. Light-headed enough to try.

After all, I had to experiment, didn't I? Find a way to evoke, familiarize myself with rituals? Why shouldn't I take this perfectly absurd routine about the gnomes, for instance, and see what happened?

Lily's marginal notes said, "Sword in cupboard, lower shelf. Important—use no other. Steel sword. Steel alone guards and commands gnomes."

I had the silly-looking old blade in my hand before I knew what I was doing. I had the blue chalk, too, as directed, and I was kneeling down facing North. The gnome kingdom.

Grimm's fairy tales? Why not find out?

Draw the mathematical design, as directed. Draw the sign of the bull—the peculiarly Egyptian sign of the bull—the peculiarly Egyptian sign, so indicative of ancient stylization. The bull of Apis, of astrology, of ancient days. A blue bull. Make it big. The gnome ma-

terializes on that sign and cannot leave it until you command. Draw it big and play safe.

Play safe? With this nonsense?

But there was a black bulk in a glass cage grinning out at me and this wasn't nonsense.

I waved the sword. I realized what a ridiculous figure I cut in that dark room, waving a "magic sword" before a lot of chalk drawings scribbled schoolboy-fashion on the floor. But there was nobody to watch me—except the glaring eyes of Satan in his prison.

Slowly I mumbled the incantation. Lily had accented it and phoneticized carefully. No mistakes. Now to recite it aloud. The sword pointed north—thus. My feet touched the tip of the outer blue circle. At the syllable breaks I must point the sword at the horns of the Bull. Sychronize. So.

"Oh Gob—" I began.

It sounded foolish. Self-conscious. Grimm's fairy tales. But I persisted. It didn't take long, after all.

No. It didn't take long before I felt the cold wind strike my face. Felt the sword tingle in my hand as I pointed, felt an electric surge sweep up my arm. Heard the syllables blaze out, saw the flame of the braziers *bend* before the words.

And then, in the Sign of the Bull, the tiny, crouching figure. It coiled into shape, into substance. The little swarthy creature with the mouse-like face, the rodent body, and the beady, glittering eyes. Standing there, bowing.

The gnome. The little man who *was* there. The little man that hid in the woods. The little dwarf man who tempted maidens in the forest. The little man who guarded the mines and the gold of earth, the little man who haunted the dark mountaintops of the north countries.

One of the ancient Pictish, Celtic *little people*. The tiny race of troglydites that lived on earth before men came, retreated to the dark depths like the serpent. The figure known to all legends and all times.

"Master?"

Oh, that piping little voice! That shocking, detestable little voice, so hateful in its reality!

And it *was* real.

I dropped the sword.

Then I picked it up. This was the sword of command. Of command. The thought hit me then. I could—command.

I COULD command this creature out of myth, command it to do anything I desired. Anything. To—kill. To burrow under a building and send it toppling to ruins, as he and his fellows toiled like rats. The way they used to burrow under castles, in ancient legend. Like a warlock, I could send it on errands of death. It was my servant, my familiar now. I could have it and its fellows. Yes, thousands of them. Merely by

command. Command with the steel of the sword.

The thought burned. Burned like Satan's eyes. Burned like fire.

I won't describe the next hour. The wave of elation that swept over me is too much a part of hysteria. I drew the Lion, kindled the flame, waved the trident. The yellow blaze revealed the lizard figure that grew out of flame, absorbed it. Fiend, imp, archetype of hell's legions, the salamander of evil. And the hissing inflection in the word, "Master?"

Here were spells that worked. Here were orisons and litanies that brought results. I couldn't send Satan back, but I could conjure up his hosts.

Conjure up his hosts! Why not? Imagine this tower room filled with waiting monstrosities from myth. Imagine *rooms* filled with them. A horde, a vast and limitless horde, all calling me—"Mister!"

Master of demons. Master of evil. Lord of a power greater than any known.

Now I knew how Keith must have felt. He'd dreamed of something like this. Men laughed at evil did they? All the better, they would not burn him at the stake for sorcery but permit him to evoke evil unmolested. He'd been a fool, Keith had. Trying to interest millionaires. Why did he need any allies? One man to rule them all, that was the way.

And Lily. Silly child! Personal vanity was her downfall. She wanted to be a Cleopatra, did she? Sheer melodrama. Juvenile. She might have been a queen—greater than a Circe. Queen of evil. But I'd stopped that. Her mistake was to rely on me for help.

I wouldn't make that mistake. I'd rely on no one. I and I alone would evoke and rule. I had the power, didn't I? I had Satan in a cage. He was no longer Prince of Darkness. I could take his place.

The King is dead. Long live the King!

Why not?

Why not evoke? Use the rituals, use all of them. Fill the room with a legion of nightmare shapes. *Revenants.* Ghouls and *efrits. Vrykolas, hippocampi, amphisbanae, striges.* An army, a black army. An army to conquer the world.

But what about Satan? What about the spell to send him back? Back to where—to hell? But we could have hell here on earth!

And why not?

An earth filled with man-made war and misery. An earth filled with pestilence, disease, idiocy. Let the Lord of Evil come into his own!

Why send Satan back at all?

I glanced at the listless black figure in the cage. Glanced and smiled. Smiled and laughed suddenly.

Was this—this thing—the fabled Lucifer? This mangy, decrepit, listless bag of bones with the sick eyes and whining sneer? Was

this whimpering mongrel really the Arch-Enemy?

I was the Master of Satan!

The room, surging with power. Pulsing with vibrations. And filled with shapes.

Until I stood there, amidst a crowded maze of circles and designs, each filled with a figure. A bowing figure that croaked, "Master!"

I stood there and made a Hell on earth.

XI
Hell on Earth

"SLOWLY, NOW—it's a surprise."

I guided Lily and Keith toward the door marked *Private*. Keith leaned feebly on my arms, but he pressed forward eagerly.

"Surprise?" gasped Lily. "You mean—you've sent him back?"

I smiled. "You'll see," I told her.

She and Keith gave me a long look. I didn't like it.

I pushed open the door. "Come into my parlor," I said.

Keith kept staring at me. So did Lily.

"Ladies, first," I said. Lily suddenly shrugged and stepped in. Keith followed her. I went in and shut the door. Locked it.

Then I faced them.

They faced the room.

They didn't say a word. They couldn't. It was too overpowering.

I'd taken the drapes off, swept the room clear of tables and cupboards. Needed more space. The place reeked with mingled incense odors, but even the braziers were gone to provide more floor area.

Floor area for *visitors*.

They stood there and gazed at Hell. My Hell. The Hell I had created by incantation, by invocation. Around the glass cage housing Satan the legions swarmed. One of each.

Hell's sample-display showroom. Take your pick. Plenty more where these came from.

The thoughts made me laugh. I did laugh, too. The noise grated against the silence, and there was a vast answering response. "Master!"

"What have you done?" Keith's eyes blazed anger.

"Merely played sorcerer's apprentice," I told him. "How do you like it?"

"These—monsters," Keith spluttered. "Do you realize what would happen if you lost control?"

"Certainly." I smiled.

"It's insane," he muttered.

"It's science," I answered. "Isn't this your dream come true?"

"It's a nightmare. I want no part of this. Send these creatures back—there's directions for that. Send them back at once."

"Change of heart, eh? Well, recognize another change at the same time. You're not giving me orders any more, Keith. I'm in charge here."

Lily stepped between us.

"You must send them back," she whispered. "You were going to get rid of Satan, remember?"

"What do you mean—remember? Do you think I'm a child? Of course I remember that foolishness. But it's no good. Think of the power I possess. Think of what we could do with these creatures working for us."

"Creatures!" Lily quavered the word.

She stood like a golden goddess, surrounded by the bobbing, weaving, crouching shapes of darkness. The tiny men with the malignant faces, the snake-like figures that shimmered in air, the canine visages of ghouls, the monstrous bulk of squatting incubae, the leprous-white crawlers. An aquarium, a menagerie, a gallery of fiends. They filled the room.

"Creatures," Lily quavered, and her glance rested on me in strange appeal. "Darling—for my sake—send them back."

"Enough," I stepped closer to her. "I'm not crazy, if that's what you mean. Three days in this room hasn't made a wreck out of me. I've learned more about the essence and nature of evil than you both know. And I'm going to use that knowledge and that power."

"The Devil is through, in other words," Keith commented, dryly. "You're taking over."

I chuckled. "That's just about the size of it. From now on, I'm in command. These creatures are my minions. At the signal they will be released."

"Send them back," Lily begged. "You don't know what's happening to you."

"Happening to me? I'm waking up, that's all. I feel more alive at this moment than I ever have. I'm strong, and he's weak. I'm going to do what no man has ever dared. I'll open the gates! Lucifer will again rule earth. Why shouldn't he —I mean I—he—*I*—"

THEN I realized.

Realized what I was saying.

I thought, "Satan," and I said, "I."

I. Satan.

I looked at Keith and the girl. Their eyes were fixed in fascination on my face.

My face!

Lily's hand was holding something out.

A mirror.

I took it.

Took the silver glass and stared at my face in the mirror. Stared at the black, goatish countenance, at the growing beard on the chin, stared—transfixed—at the strangely darkened temples from which *the two horns were beginning to protrude!*

What had happened to Keith and Lily had happened to me. Three days in a room with the black man, three days in a room while his will gnawed at my soul in darkness, burrowed in.

The change had taken place. *I was Satan!*

The mirror fell and shattered. I stood there, looking at the dark skin on the back of my hands. The dark skin on the back of my—claws.

I was Satan and I had evoked demons and I would rule earth.

Madness!

But why not?

Nobody was dashing holy water in *my* face. Nobody was waving any crucifixes. Nobody was shooting any—

I saw it out of the corner of my eye. Keith's holster, with the two guns, lying on the little table near the door. Saw it as he saw it and made a dash. I got there first.

I pulled the guns out and pointed them very carefully. Keith stopped in his tracks.

"No you don't," I chuckled. "No one is shooting me, if you please. Lily—the door is locked. Very tightly," She'd made a dash, too. "We are all alone now. With out—servitors." I chuckled again. It was beginning to feel very pleasant.

"Stand still, both of you," I directed.

"Madman," Keith shouted. "Put down those revolvers!"

"Please—" Lily whispered.

I slipped one weapon into my pocket, held the other high in my right hand. My blackening right hand. I could *feel* it change. I *pulsed*. Every nerve tingling, as the change completed.

One claw held the revolver. The other rose.

"Now, you two. When I lower my left hand, our little playmates will be released. I don't need my right hand for anything but keeping you covered. So remember. Stand and watch."

"Satan!" Keith mumbled. "Satan incarnate!"

I laughed. The grinning throng waited behind me. Waited, and ravened. I could feel their pulsations mingling with my own. How they lusted to be free! To walk the earth once more; to walk and creep and crawl and lope and fly and—kill! They waited and they crouched for my command. My command would free them.

The strength welling in me. . . .

I lifted my left hand high.

Then Lily moved.

"Back or I'll shoot!" I screamed.

She came forward. Her eyes held no hate and no fear, only a pleading that burned and burned. I had to get rid of that burning. Kill her, kill her and release them. Free the hordes of Hell!

My left hand swooped. My right hand moved out. Then hand of Satan. I flicked my wrist, pressed the trigger—and sent a bullet crashing into my brain.

XII
Fall of Lucifer

"EASY," I said. "Easy."

"Must probe," grunted Keith.

"Get it out. Silver bullet or no, there might be infection."

"Easy," I repeated. Then, "Are you sure it's gone?"

Lily smiled down at me.

"Of course, darling. They're all gone. And the cage is empty. The instant you fired the gun they disappeared. Not in a cloud of brimstone, either. They just—weren't there."

I smiled. It wasn't so hard, because Keith had the little silver pellet out.

"Lucky shot," he commented. "Just missed grazing the parietal lobe."

"I still can't understand it," I said. "Can't understand what made me shoot myself and why Satan disappeared."

"The oldest story in the world," answered Keith. "Virtue triumphant. It fought the evil in you and won, even though you weren't conscious of it. When Lily came toward you the battle was resolved. You and the Devil fought it out in your own soul, and you won."

I shook my head as Keith continued.

"Evil preys on inner weakness. In my case, Satan focussed his forces on my dominant quality of ambition. That ambition, directed sanely, caused me to embark on scientific research. Perverted just a little, Satan made my ambition become a lust for power at any price.

"In Lily's possession, her natural feminine vanity was accentuated to the point where she desired utter adoration. Again the psychology of evil came into play. And when the Devil invaded you, he worked through your love of learning, turning your scholarly inclinations into the field of sorcery."

"It's hard to believe now," I said. "Maybe it was all a mass hallucination. Those old wive's tales—"

Keith chuckled.

"Perhaps what we saw and called Satan *wasn't* physically real. We each saw a different figure in the glass cage, and Considine and Wintergreen might have had their own concepts. Even these creatures you materialized might be merely focal imaginative visions.

"But this I know. Whether we choose to personify it as Satan, or the Devil, or the Powers of Darkness—evil exists as a force in this world of ours. Describe it in terms of witchcraft or psychiatry as you will—evil is real."

Lily laid her head on my shoulder. "Let's forget it all now," she suggested.

"Suits me. Got any methods to suggest?"

"Well, if you're not too sick—"

"Too sick? I feel swell."

"Well, if you're not too sick, I suggest we celebrate."

"Fine idea," I responded.

"Sure," said Keith. "Let's go out and raise hell! Why—what's the matter?"

"Nothing at all," I replied; and fainted.

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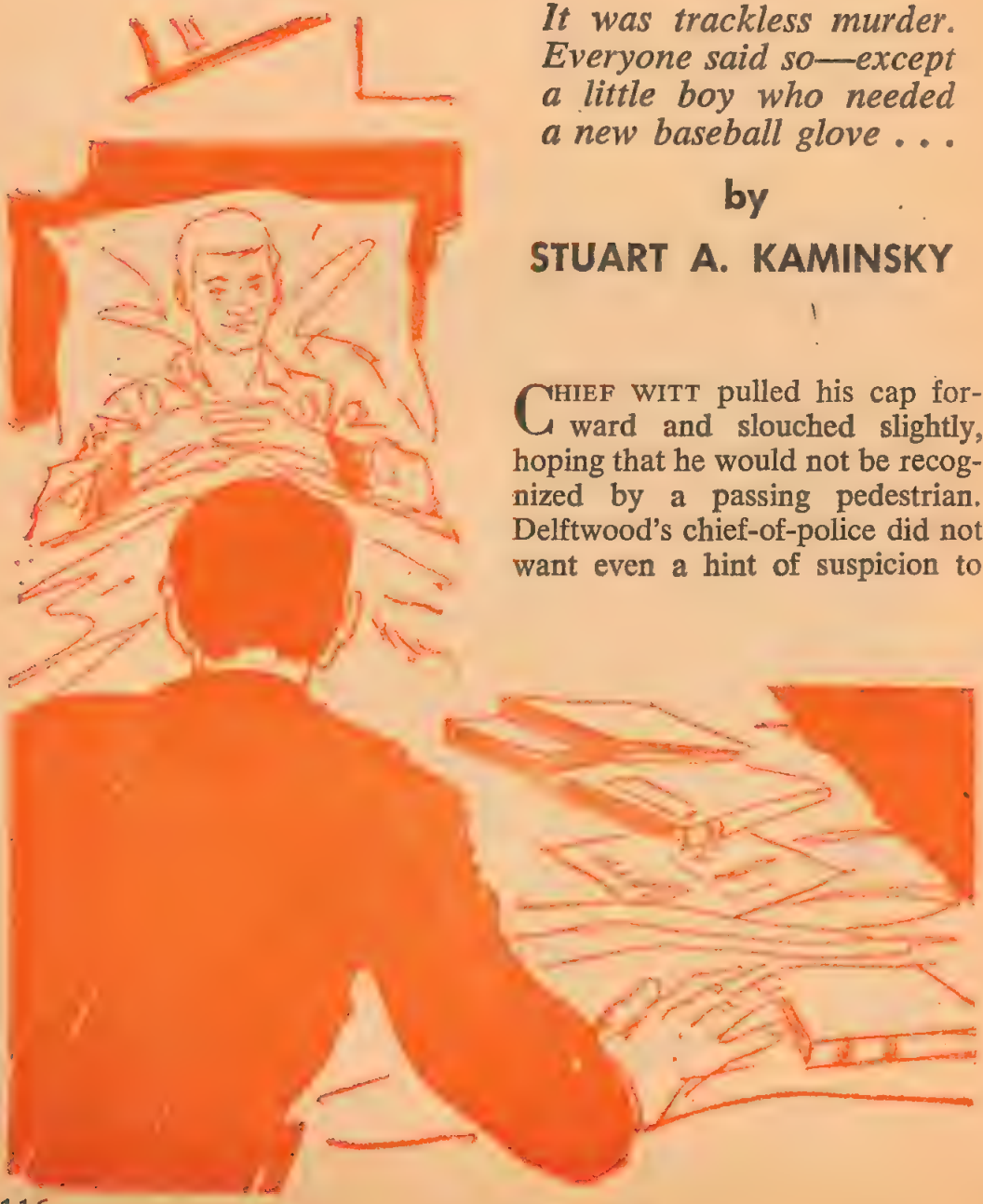

It was trackless murder. Everyone said so—except a little boy who needed a new baseball glove . . .

by

STUART A. KAMINSKY

CHIEF WITT pulled his cap forward and slouched slightly, hoping that he would not be recognized by a passing pedestrian. Delftwood's chief-of-police did not want even a hint of suspicion to

leak out that he was about to consult a twelve-year-old boy about a murder case. Political careers had been ruined by far less.

He shifted his weight and smoothed out a crease in his neatly pressed uniform as he glanced at the hulking, unkempt man at his side who drove quickly and expertly through the dark afternoon rain. "Bollo" Breedlove's ever-present smile broadened as he took his eyes off the road for an instant to look at Witt.

"Sergeant Breedlove, will you please keep your eyes on the street?" Witt pleaded.

"Yes, sir. I'm sure it's important, Chief, or Pete wouldn't have asked you to come to the house. If his leg wasn't broken, he'd come down to headquarters, like he did last year with the Decker case."

"All right, Breedlove. I'm not saying the boy didn't give us a lot of help on that case, but that was different. We've got no problem here. Everyone knows Mike Quell killed the old woman and that's that. Plenty of evidence, motive, everything we need. Will you keep your eyes on the road?"

"Right, Chief," whispered the huge driver, removing one hand from the wheel to reach under his worn police cap and scratch a balding, freckled head.

"And besides," Witt continued, "he's been in bed with a broken leg since she was murdered. How can he have any information that we don't? Who does he think did it if it wasn't Quell?"

"Don't know," Bollo Breedlove chuckled, turning the car into a narrow driveway. "Let's see what he has to say."

"I should have my head examined," Witt muttered, getting out of the parked car and waiting while Breedlove lumbered out to join him. "What could your grandson know about this that we don't?" Breedlove smiled and shrugged. The two men made their way to the front porch of the well-maintained, but aged little frame house.

"I'm home," Breedlove said, stepping into the warm living room. Witt walked in behind him, removing his cap and brushing back his neatly-combed grey hair.

Witt had been in the house a few times in the five years he had been Delftwood's chief of police and the atmosphere always made him sleepy. Breedlove, his daughter-in-law and his grandson lived quietly and comfortably, seldom mentioning Walt Junior, who had died in Korea.

"Chief Witt, it's nice to see you again," said Kate Breedlove, coming into the room with her hand outstretched. "How is your wife and the children?"

"Fine," Witt replied, noticing the tiny blonde's flour-marked hands and apron. "Don't let us keep you. We just stopped by to see Pete."

"Well, he's still in his bed so you won't have any trouble finding

him." She sighed. "I think I'll throw a block party when he gets on his feet and back to school. Did you ever try to keep a bed-bound twelve-year-old boy from getting bored? Don't bother to answer. Would you like a drink, Chief Walt?"

The two men refused and Kate returned to the kitchen. Breedlove grinned and led the way down a short hall and into the small bedroom. A chubby, blond boy in blue flannel pajamas with white circles paused in his attempt to scratch an unseen itch under a plaster cast and looked up at the two men.

"Hi, Bollo. Hi, Chief. This thing really itches like crazy."

Breedlove cleared a pile of books from the bed and sat down next to the boy, whose hair he ruffled playfully. Witt sat in a straw chair next to the bed and cleared his throat.

"About the murder, Pete," said Witt.

"You mean Miss Quell or the one I figured out last year," replied the boy, trying again to scratch his covered leg.

"I thought we decided that we worked together last year," said Witt.

"Yeah, I guess we did. Well, with Miss Quell, I know who killed her."

"We all know," added Witt quickly. "It was Mike, her nephew."

"I read that in the Delftwood *News-Director,* but that's wrong. Bollo told me about the case, and I—"

"Wait," said Witt. "The facts are simple. Miss Beatrice Quell—"

"Quashy Quell, we called her," mumbled the boy. "Fattest woman in Delftwood."

"Pete, you don't talk that way about the dead," said Breedlove.

"Sorry, Bollo."

"May I continue?" Witt whispered. "Thank you. At exactly nine o'clock Monday night, just as the church tower bell rang, Miss Quell called headquarters and Officer Lydecker answered the phone. She said, and he recognized her voice. 'This is Beatrice Quell and —.' Before she could say more, and while the tower bell was still ringing, Lydecker heard a shot over the phone and that was it.

"Lydecker sent a car over and called me. I immediately had her three nephews picked up. Had them within ten minutes. Meanwhile I got to Miss Quell's house about the same time as the patrol car. Both doors were locked. All windows were locked from the inside. We broke down the back door, went in and found Miss Quell, all two hundred forty pounds of her, on the living room floor with the phone in her hand and a bullet in her heart. All clear so far?"

"Sure," said the boy who had stopped scratching and was now chewing on his pajamas.

"Fine. We check and find from one of the nephews, Al Quell over

at Quell's Drug Store, that the locks at Miss Quell's had been changed that morning and only the three nephews and the old woman had keys. We found hers in her purse.

"We checked with the locksmith and he says no other keys were made and only those keys could open the doors. The nephews all had their keys on them when we picked them up. No one knows whose idea it was to change the locks, but the old woman was a bit of a nut anyway.

"So, with all of the doors locked, the logical conclusion is that someone with a key, one of the three nephews, killed the old lady, locked the door and ran. They all stand to make a lot of money. She was loaded. So we began to check alibis, and—"

"Chief," said the boy, "did you check the locksmith's alibi?"

The chief grinned for the first time.

'Yes, we checked him for nine o'clock. He was at an Elks meeting; plenty of witnesses. We also checked the possibility of a duplicate key being made. It's a tricky lock and it would have taken a few days to get the right matrix from Chicago. So, excluding the possibility that one of the nephews had an accomplice, we started to check their alibis for nine o'clock."

"I know why it couldn't be an accomplice," the boy said brightly. "Because if the nephews had the keys on them just a little after the murder someone would have had to give it to them if that someone were the murderer, and except for Mike, the others were too far away from the house a few minutes later and no accomplice would have had time to meet them."

"Very clever," said Witt.

"Sure is," agreed Breedlove.

"To continue," Witt went on, "at nine o'clock Al Quell was locking his drug store a mile away. Plenty of people around. Steven Quell—"

"Skinny Minnie Quell," mumbled the boy.

"Steven Quell," Witt went on, "was walking down Center Street and saw his brother locking his store. He remembers seeing who was with him. Half a block further down Center Street he saw the Collins twins in front of the Fox Theater. Both twins remember that it was exactly nine, because the—"

"Church bell was ringing," said Pete Breedlove.

"Right," continued Witt with a frown, "and they were just in time for the feature, which started at a minute after nine. Not only that, but Steve Quell saw Officer Jack Meany giving a ticket to a short, fat man, and Meany's report for the night shows that exactly nine o'clock he stopped under a street light at First and Center to give a ticket to a Mr. Katz, a short, fat man who had smashed his car into a light pole. I think that is sufficient alibi for Steve Quell."

"He used to be a bird watcher," Pete replied reaching over the side of his bed and pulling up an old notebook.

"Yes, but it has nothing to do with the case." Witt shifted slightly. "Well to continue. Mike Quell, a surly ba—son of a gun, has less than an alibi. Claims someone called him and told him to get down

to the old boat house in Cove Woods, behind Miss Quell's house. This so-called caller said they or he'd found something valuable belonging to Mike.

"So, according to a half-sober Mike Quell, at exactly nine he was alone, about one hundred yards from the scene of the murder. Item two, Mike Quell admits owning a thirty-eight automatic, which is now missing. Miss Quell was killed with a thirty-eight. Item three, all the nephews knew they would share the old woman's estate when she went, but Mike is the one who seems most anxious to get his hands on it.

"Add to this the public knowledge that Miss Quell had been threatening to cut him out of her will unless he stopped drinking, and you've got a pretty good motive."

"Mike Quell is the best shortstop Delftwood High ever had," said Pete, looking absently through the notebook.

"That doesn't make him innocent," Witt added quickly.

"He didn't do it," said the boy. "Did he, Bollo?"

The fat man scratched his head and shrugged.

"If I show someone else could have done it, will you get me a new baseball glove?" said the boy slyly.

Kate Breedlove walked into the room with coffee for the men and a glass of chocolate milk for Pete, who downed it in two long gulps before Kate had stepped out of the room.

"If you show that someone else did it, or could have done it, I'll give you a new baseball glove," said Witt, sipping at the welcomed coffee which might help to hold off the migraine he feared was on the way.

"That's a deal, Chief. You heard it, Bollo."

"Yup, but wipe the milk off your mouth."

"Well," the boy beamed, looking down at his notebook, "there are a couple of things to get straight first. Miss Quell's house is way up on Cove Hill over Delftwood. The living room where she was found faces out into the woods away from town."

"This is not new information,"

said Witt, spying with some distaste a still existent chocolate mustache on the boy's upper lip.

"I know, but listen. Nobody heard the shot, Bollo says, because it's a pretty thick old house and there aren't any neighbors nearby."

"Wait," Witt said. "Officer Lydecker heard the shot over the phone."

"Sure, but—" Pete's excited arms were in the air. "Just listen. When Bollo told me about the murder, some things hit me as pretty funny. Like the murder taking place at exactly nine and the murderer letting her use the phone and the locks being changed that morning and the murderer locking the door behind him."

"Coincidence," Witt sighed, finishing his coffee. "Locking the door was Mike Quell's mistake. If he had left it open, we'd never have been able to narrow it down to the nephews. It happens all the time. Mike had a fight with the old lady. She got mad when he pulled out a gun and started a fuss. She called the police. He shot her, panicked, locked the door, ran into the woods and threw the gun away. He couldn't even come up with a decent story."

"But," said the boy reading from his notes, "if Mike is telling the truth, then someone has done a good job of making it look like he's the murderer. Now who would do that but one of the other nephews? With Mike gone, they would split the old lady's money only two ways."

"Is that what kids do now?" Witt addressed Breedlove. "Sit around thinking about murder?"

"Chief," the boy said. "So maybe one of the others wanted it to look like Mike did it. Maybe the one who did it wanted everyone to know she was killed at exactly nine, when Mike was in the woods at the boat house. If that's true then the killer must have set up an alibi for nine to cover himself."

"I'd say both of the others have perfect alibis," Witt said, placing his empty cup on the floor.

"That's it, that's it!" shouted Pete Breedlove. "They both don't have perfect alibis. At nine Al Quell was closing his drug store. A customer saw him and Skinny Minnie, I mean Steve Quell, saw him too. But who saw Steve Quell?"

Witt tried to hide the look of disgust as he vowed to tell Bollo Breedlove to stop discussing cases with the boy.

"Look," Witt said lifting his right hand and counting off the fingers, "Steve was on Center Street, a mile from the murder. He saw his brother close his store at exactly nine. He saw the Collins twins in front of the Fox Theater at exactly nine. He saw Officer Meany giving this guy Katz a ticket at exactly nine."

"That's what I mean," said the boy laying his notes aside and gritting his teeth for another assault on his itching leg. "He saw them all at

exactly nine. The Fox Theater is a block away from the Drug Store. Meany, according to Bollo, was another block down. At exactly nine Steve Quell saw three things taking place about two and a half blocks from each other."

"Wait a minute!" Witt grinned and put up a hand. "Al Quell might have closed a minute or two early. Meany might have been a minute or two off. The twins were sure of the time, but—"

"But nobody saw Steve Quell," Pete insisted. "To see all that he would probably have to hurry down the street, but no one saw him, and how come he didn't say anything about seeing that guy Katz's car against the pole. Bollo says it was where he would have to pass at about nine."

"He forgot," said Witt.

"Maybe," said the boy. "But Bollo checked and Steve says he might have seen the wreck but didn't pay any attention. That seems pretty funny unless he didn't see the wreck at all. So I had an idea. Bollo went up to Miss Quell's last night to see if there's a room in back of the house where you can see Center Street."

"Breedlove," Witt whispered grimly, feeling the headache coming. "Did you go up there without telling me?"

"Well Chief, you see—"

"We'll talk about it later."

"So," said the boy, "Bollo did find one room. With a pair of binoculars he could see some good lighted—"

"Well lighted," Breedlove interrupted.

"Yeah, well lighted places on the right side of Center Street like the drug store, front of the Fox and under the light where Meany gave the ticket. But he couldn't see the left side, where the wreck would have been."

"Hold on!" Witt shouted and stood up. "Where was this room?"

"Top floor," said Breedlove. "In back."

"Right," said Witt with a smile. "How could he be on the fourth floor in the back establishing an alibi at exactly nine, while he was murdering his aunt in the living room? And don't tell me he killed her up there and dragged her down to the living room. She weighed a good two hundred forty, compared to his soaking wet one hundred thirty or one hundred forty.

"By the time he got the body down, we would have been there. Besides there wasn't a mark on her to show she had been bumped or dragged. Even if he could have lifted her, it would have taken him five or six minutes to get her to the living room."

"It would have taken at least ten minutes to get her down," Breedlove whispered. "Pete had me take a keg of nails down from there."

"Yes," said Pete, "and Bollo's strong and the nails only weighed one hundred fifty pounds."

"Well I'm not all that strong," said Breedlove, blushing.

"Save the family compliments for some other time," Witt shouted, placing a hand on his forehead. "You admit he couldn't have got her down."

"Oh yes sir," said the boy. "But there is a telephone in that room."

binoculars, dialed police headquarters, and when he heard Lydecker, turned on her voice and the prerecorded shot that he could have got any time.

"While Lydecker was listening, Steve Quell was looking down at Center Street. Then he hung up the phone, ran down the stairs, took

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"So."

Pete Breedlove leaned forward and spoke softly.

"Suppose he shot her in the living room before nine and then went up to the back room on the fourth floor. Then suppose he had a tape recorder with a tape of her voice saying 'This is Beatrice Quell.' That wouldn't be hard for him to get. So he stood at the window with his

the living room phone off the hook, locked the door and left."

"No, wait a minute," cried Witt. "This is—where would he get binoculars and a tape recorder? Why?"

"He's a bird watcher," said Pete Breedlove. "He watches birds, records them in Cove Woods."

Witt's eyes wandered around the room as his headache swelled. A

University of Illinois pennant danced over the quilted bed. Autographed photos of ball players surrounded him.

"But," Witt gasped, "the gun. We picked him up just a few minutes after nine. Officers Meany and Carl picked him up and he had no gun."

"Threw it in Cove Woods. Probably stole it from Mike."

"The binoculars and tape recorder," Witt muttered, sitting down again. "He couldn't throw them away. We might find them, trace them to him."

"Easy," said the boy. "He could erase the tape on his way downtown. He wanted to get to Center Street fast. Was he carrying anything when Meany and Carl found him?"

"Yes," said Bollo proudly. "I told you yesterday, Pete."

"But," said Witt, "he didn't have binoculars or a tape recorder in his brief case."

"Are you sure?" said Pete. "Or did you just ask them to search him for a gun?"

Witt pulled himself together and stood again. "We can settle it easily enough. I'll just call Meany." He went to the phone next to the boy's bed and dialed a number.

"This is Chief Witt. Is your father there? Hello, Meany. Listen. You and Carl searched Steve Quell the night of the murder. I know he had no gun, but did he have a small tape recorder and a pair of binoculars in his brief case? I see. No. I'll see you in the morning." He hung up and turned to the two Breedloves, who looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Tape recorder, yes. Binoculars, no," mumbled Witt.

"No binoculars?" the boy sighed.

"No," said Witt, fumbling in his pocket for a migraine pill. "But he did happen to have a collapsible telescope."

"Should I pick up Steve Quell, Chief?" Breedlove said with a wide smile and proud glance at his scratching grandson.

"Yes," said Witt. "We'll question him in my office. And Breedlove, let's just keep quiet for the time being about Pete's part in this."

"Right, Chief." Breedlove rose and shook his grandson's pudgy hand.

"Okay with you, Pete?" said the fat man.

"Sure. I think I'd like a Maury Wills model."

"What?" said the chief.

"Maury Wills model baseball glove," explained Bollo Breedlove on his way out.

"Of course," Witt sighed and stood up to follow the sergeant.

As he turned to the door a chubby, blond twelve-year-old boy reached under his pillow for a stack of baseball cards. The top card was a full-color reproduction of Maury Wills.

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Please print **Nov—66**

NIGHT HIDES THE RUNNER

Sometimes a tale is woven of nightmares, to keep one awake until dawn. Like—this one!

by

JERRY JACOBSON

EVERY NIGHT he had to run around the lake, that miserable lake, with the wind throwing mist in his pocked, white face and his legs aching for rest and his father watching like a policeman to see he didn't loaf or drop off into the bushes for a breather.

He had to tour the lake twice, two times around that three-mile path, come hell or high water, his father told him.

It was no fun at all, just work. Halfway around the lake on that first lap he always felt like quitting, but of course he couldn't because his father was always there to goad him, threaten him into another

stride. His father, riding along side on the soft, plushy seat of the English bicycle, with its three-speed gear shift and pedals to push instead of a rutted, rocky path.

The worst part about the running was he didn't even have a clear idea of why he had to do it. What in the world was he suppose to be prepping for, anyway? Life? Certainly not that, certainly that was a senseless reason for the running, because in school the rich ones never ran and the handsome ones played football or baseball, and the intelligent ones and the talented ones knew better than to pump themselves to death around a cold, lonely lake at nine o'clock at night like a utter fool.

No, the rich ones and the handsome ones and the intelligent and talented ones, they would eventually run life. The runners fooled themselves; the runners would run only races.

The first lap over, the boy fell in soft grass near the bathhouse, which had been their starting point, and ran his slim hand through black hair, now stringy with sweat, peering out with something like rage or hatred at the man who sat at ease on the bicycle. His father had never been good at any sport. He couldn't even ride that bicycle and make the riding look professional. He couldn't even master a simple thing like that.

"You tired, boy?" the man asked threateningly. The only sounds now were car engines up the hill going by on the highway, and the whistle of wind through thick willows and the water lapping at the lake's shore and the father's echoing voice, the taunt and sneer of his words. "You wanna call it quits?"

"Yes."

"Sure you do. What's the matter with you, anyway? You want to grow up being a loser? You want to learn the knack of not finishing things you start out to do?"

"I don't care. But I don't like running."

The father said, with a sneer, "You'll learn to like it. By God, you'll learn to like it!"

"Why?" the boy asked. The question was as eternal as the willows and the wind and the lap of water off the lake. Every night the boy asked why the running and every night the father always gave him the same reply. Which he gave him now, while, hidden by darkness the boy mouthed the words.

"Because every man must be good at something and this is your talent. Only this."

"But I can be good at other things. Mathematics, for instance. In school I'm good at mathematics. But I'll never be good at running."

"Boy, remember this," the father said, his words echoing deeply against the night. "You will never be good at anything but running. Only running. Your grandfather

died penniless with a heart attack, I am penniless, with a bad heart. The running! The running will be your only chance to make a mark for yourself. The running will get you a good job. The running will make your heart strong. Here, we break the pattern, you and I. Here is where we out-fox the genes. Here. Running."

High above the trees the moon moved away from dark clouds, or was it the clouds moving? The boy could not tell. But there was movement and mathematics, with the moon at this distance a perfect circle and the clouds racing across its face like jagged surfaces of other worlds.

Tonight he would rather go to the moon. Tonight he would rather go to the movies. Thirteen years and he had done neither. Thirteen years of never once going to the moon or going to the movies, and the one was as probable as the other.

"Time," said the father, whispering it like an angry wind. "Time."

"No. I don't want to run another. I'm tired."

"You run, by God! Get up. Get up!"

The boy stiffened on the wet grass and did not move. Tonight was the night to make his decision never to run like this again. Tonight the man would have to climb down off his bicycle and beat him to death. It would take only that.

"Boy, get up. It's time. It's time to run."

"No," said the boy and watched to see what would happen.

For a frightful instance the boy thought the father was going to come after him. He shifted on the bicycle seat and glared down, but he did not get off. Finally, sighing the father said, "The movies. You do the last lap and you can go to the movies. Is that a deal?"

"Word of honor?"

"Word of honor. You run and you can go to the movies. Do you know what's playing?"

"*Space Creature,*" said the boy, his chest swelling with hope. "And *Monster Out of Nowhere.*"

"That sounds like a good double-feature," the father said. "Run first, then the movie. Okay? Deal?"

"Okay," said the boy. "Deal."

It was going to be a long lap, but not so long now that he was going to the movie. The boy hiked himself up from the grass and cinched up the draw string on his sweat pants, and looked out at the path winding around the lake in the moonlight. Six minutes halfway, six minutes to the bathhouse. Twelve minutes and then the movie.

He jogged out onto the path and felt the strength return to his legs. It was not second wind now, but new wind. He pumped easily along through the darkness, counting the trees as he passed them, watching the moon consume clouds

and listening to the bicycle whirring along close behind.

When he reached the halfway point he glanced left, still jogging, and picked out the bathhouse that was the finish line. He ran bored and cold and without purpose, hating it, loathing it. He ran pointlessly except for the reward of the movie.

When they reached the bathhouse, the boy stopped abruptly and turned. "Okay?" he said.

The wind had died. The water lapping at the shore ceased its even rhythm.

"Okay what?" his father said.

The boy's breathing stopped. Was he kidding him? Just being mean?

"The movie," the boy said. "You told me if I finished the lap you'd let me go to the movie."

"The movie?" his father said. "What movie? There was nothing said about any movie."

The boy felt his chest grow thick with pain and humiliation. He wanted to cry, that was all, just cry. "But you said—"

"I said finish the second lap and then we can go home," the father said. "Movies? That's ridiculous. Runners do not waste time at the movies. Runners run, just run. That's all they deserve."

"But you said—"

"Be quiet," said the father angrily. "I know what I said. Run and then home. That's all I said. Run and then home."

The boy stood very still on the running path in the moonlight. He couldn't cry. The thing in his chest had grown too large to allow him tears. The pain of it was too large, a giant, spiked ball inflating slowly.

The father was teetering on the bike, leering at him, chuckling like a fool who did things without reasons—like Leshi Peters, the crazy kid who walked home from school whipping the heads from snakes.

The wind came again and with it the whistling of willows and the low lapping of waves off the shore. Movement, mathematics. Suddenly then, without warning, without reason, the boy began jogging away.

"Where are you going? Another lap? No more laps. We're going home."

The boy could hear the sprockets of the bicycle begin to whir and clank as he picked up his pace. This was the way, the only way, he thought. He stretched out his stride until he could feel the muscles on his thighs and calfs begin to ache. Faster, faster he ran and the ground flew away under his feet as though it were moving under its own power.

"Fool," yelled the father, from

behind, "fool kid! Stop! Come back!"

The boy heard but disregarded him. He had nearly reached halfway again and he could hear behind him the wheezing of his father's lungs and the whirring of the bike's wheels, both sounding labored and very tired.

"I catch you, I'll kill you!" the father shouted, gaining, pumping faster. "Kill you, I swear! Kill you!"

The boy's second wind came, that beautiful second wind and all at once he liked the running, loved it even, because now there was a reason for it, a goal, something to shoot for. He slowed, letting the man come within reaching distance, then speeded up, making the man seem a fool, making him swear loudly into the night.

"Kill you! Kill you!"

The boy slowed again, then sped up again, then slowed again, then moved out of reach. The running was a pure joy now, a pure wonderous joy. He ran and waited. He ran and waited and listened.

Then it came. The man's wheezing stopped and the whirring of the bicycle stopped. There was the discordant clatter of metal as though the bicycle had been thrown to the ground.

The boy stopped running and turned. Back twenty yards the bicycle and the father lay side by side. A wheel spun, a hand rose in the air, gesturing. The boy jogged back and stopped and looked down at the man gasping to speak. In his eyes was the fear of death and on his hand the tremble of urgency.

"Is it your heart?" the boy asked, looking down. "Your heart?"

The man could not speak, but he nodded. His mouth fell open, words formed in his throat, on the tip of his tongue, on the edge of the night. "Doct—get—doct—"

"Doctor?" asked the boy. "You want me to run for a doctor?"

The man nodded.

The boy reached up and wiped his forehead. Then he stooped and wedged his slim hand into the man's back pocket. He came out with the wallet and took a dollar bill from it and then put the wallet back.

"For the movies," he said. "I took a dollar for the movies. Is that all right, father?"

The father's head shook violently from side to side. His eyes raged.

"You said 'word of honor' to me. You gave me your word," the boy told him, "You said I could go."

The boy tucked the dollar in the waist band of his sweat pants and then turned and ran off over the hill. The moon was bright on the grass.

He sighed; he didn't know any doctors, or where he could get one at this hour. And he was late for the movies as it was.

The theater was two miles, but his legs were still strong and his wind still good. He would make it. If he ran like his father had taught him he would make it.

IT'S—

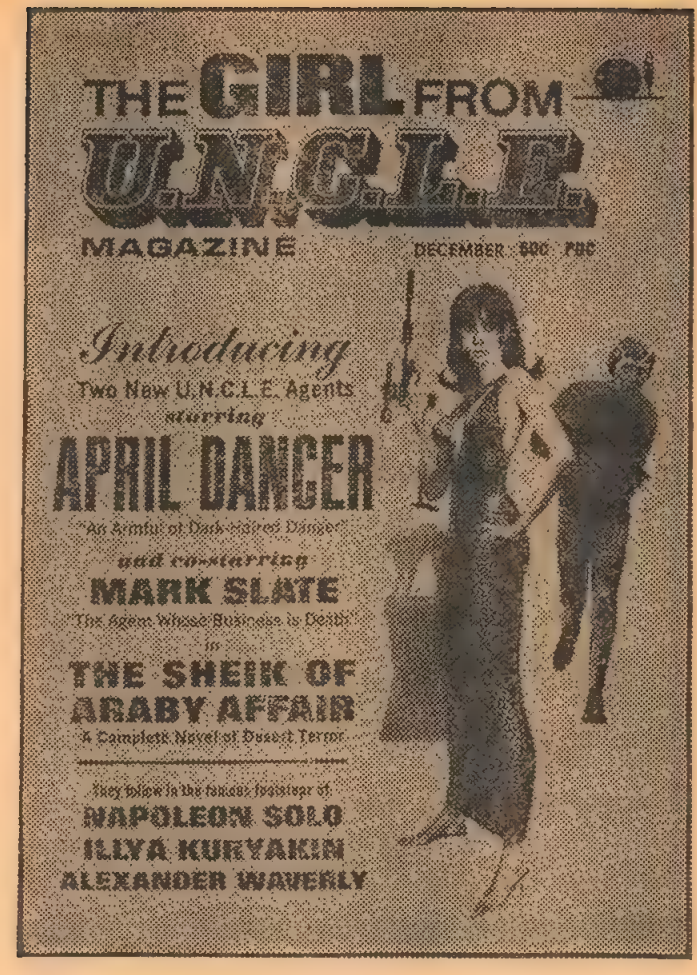
BRAND NEW

IT'S—

WONDERFUL

IT'S—

SENSATIONAL



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I'll Have a Bier

by
CARROLL MAYERS

"You got two days," they told him. "Then, four hundred bucks—or a bullet where it hurts the most!"

HARRY MARSH had a problem. In itself, that was a twist, because ordinarily Harry specialized in dilemmas other than his own.

As barkeep in a small side-street tavern, Harry bent a sympathetic ear to the varied trials and tribulations of his customers, offering considered counsel wherever indicated.

On this particular February afternoon, however, Harry needed help himself—and hadn't the slightest notion where he might get it.

The problem was two-fold: financial and physical. Financial, to the extent of four hundred dollars, toward which he had exactly fifteen dollars and twenty-nine cents. And physical, to the degree of what defense, if any, a relatively flabby barman might hope to put up when the Syndicate turned on the muscle after that same four hundred was not forthcoming.

"I'll raise it by next week sure," Harry had guaranteed the cold-eyed collector. Only he hadn't raised it. Now it was more than a week, it was ten days, and all the bitter self-recrimination about getting into that floating crap game without first checking a possible underworld affiliation wasn't helping one iota.

He hardly could expect his reprieve to continue.

Harry swiped at the mahogany, cocking an eye toward the bar's front window. A chill morning rain had turned to sleet; it was now foul afoot, miserable enough to discourage anyone from venturing out unless absolutely necessary. Maybe the collector wouldn't come today, either.

The weather had ruined business; there'd been but four patrons the past hour, none of whom had solicited Harry's conversation, and now the last customer paid his tab and left.

Harry rang up the sale, set to polishing glasses vigorously. Keep busy, that was the thing to do. Keep your mind very occupied.

The afternoon wore on. By four-thirty, with the weather worsening and only ninety minutes left to his stint, Harry began to feel a trifle better. He'd make it through another day.

But he didn't. Because at twenty minutes to five, with the bar once again empty, the same bleak-visaged collector came in.

"Double Scotch," the man said. "And no cheap label, friend."

Even though he wasn't ever going to be paid for the drink, Harry automatically reached for his best stock.

"Sure thing," he agreed, filling a glass and suddenly conscious his armpits had become clammy.

The Syndicate man sampled the liquor.

"Not bad," he murmured. He took a second sip, then emptied the glass with a quick toss. "I'll have a refill while you get it."

Harry tongued stiff lips, feigned incomprehension to delay the inevitable. "It?"

A thin smile flickered.

"The money," the man said simply.

Perspiration dotted Harry's hairline; his chest constricted. "I—haven't got it."

The collector gave no indication he'd heard. "Four C's, friend."

Harry swallowed, traced a crack in the bar.

"I haven't got it," he repeated slowly.

The thin smile died. "No games, mister."

Harry flinched.

"I'm not playing any game," he said. "I just don't have it." His voice broke as he added desperately, "But I'll get it! I swear—"

"You told us that before."

"I—I know."

"A week, you said. Just give you a week."

"I know, I know!"

"So what happened?"

"I—I couldn't raise it. But I will this time!"

Abruptly, the collector slapped Harry, then grabbed his bar jacket, yanking him against the mahogany.

"This is the end of the line, Marsh," he said. "If we take care of the heavy-money welshers—*and we do*—don't think we're letting a two-bit loser like you off the hook. You don't get another week. You get just two days."

With a final wrench of his jacket, the man released Harry, stood for a long moment stabbing him with his cold eyes. Then he wheeled, strode out of the bar.

Knees weak, Harry drew a ragged breath, sick with despair. He had no friend who could advance him the sizeable sum, and loan companies were out; they made a routine of asking embarrassing questions and Harry's record over the years had not been entirely top drawer. That check kiting bit two years back, for instance.

Going to the police would be useless; even if they were sympathetic—a highly dubious possibility, considering his background. They hardly would extend him twenty-four-hour protection indefinitely.

The bar was still empty and Harry was still cloaked in despondency when Mr. Thatcher made his appearance a few minutes past five. Such a visitation was on schedule; Mr. Thatcher was an elderly widower employed as head bookkeeper for a manufacturing company with offices in the next block, and he nightly dropped in on Harry for a single stein of beer on his way home.

Tonight, the ritual was slightly altered. Mr. Thatcher announced, "Two beers, Harry, if you please."

For all his gloom, the deviation intrigued Harry. "Two?"

The old gentleman smiled. "Precisely," he said. "The second one's for you. You're joining my little celebration." Mr. Thatcher turned, swept one arm toward the sleet-spattered window. "I still have a personal problem or two, but this beautiful day's the one I've been anticipating for sixty-five years, Harry."

Beautiful—this miserable afternoon? Harry was lost. Drawing the two glasses, he said uncertainly, "I'm afraid I'm not with you."

Mr. Thatcher sobered a bit.

"I'm through working, Harry," he explained. "I'm retiring. Today

was my last." He took an appreciative sip of his brew. "After all these years, it's a wonderful feeling."

Harry went through the motion of drinking with Mr. Thatcher, although his present status rendered the beer tasteless. "It must be," he managed to agree.

"And that's not all," the old gentleman added, his smile coming back as he withdrew an unaddressed business envelope from his pocket, extended it to Harry. "What do you think of that?"

The envelope was unsealed, and it was obvious Mr. Thatcher was inviting Harry to investigate its content. Harry did, whereupon his hands were seized with a sudden tremor. Inside the envelope, made out to Olin Thatcher, was a check for five hundred dollars.

"It's a personal award from the company," Mr. Thatcher went on, quiet pride in his voice as he quoted, "'for a lifetime of diligent service'."

Harry's temples were pounding. Five hundred dollars! Retiring as he was, Mr. Thatcher could have no urgent need for the money. And four hundred of it was all he needed to square himself with the Syndicate.

He said hesitatingly, "Mr. Thatcher—"

"Yes."

"About that check—"

The old gentleman eyed Harry closely. "What about it?"

Harry inhaled deeply. "I'm in trouble; I need some money, Mr. Thatcher. Four hundred dollars. I can't raise it anywhere." He stopped, then plunged ahead. "If you could advance it to me from that check—"

Mr. Thatcher took another sip of his beer. "What sort of trouble?"

Harry's gaze wavered. "I've been gambling."

"That's too bad," the old gentleman said, his tone reflective. "It's very foolish to gamble, Harry."

"But everybody does it! You have yourself. Remember that fifty dollars you told me you won on the numbers?"

"It's still foolish," Mr. Thatcher countered simply. "I'm sorry, Harry."

There was a finality to the words that chilled Harry. Mr. Thatcher couldn't turn him down!

"But you don't understand," he protested. "I'm in trouble with the Syndicate. If I don't pay up, they may kill me."

"For four hundred dollars?"

"As an example for other welshers. They've already told me as much." Harry's voice shook. "Believe me, Mr. Thatcher, I wouldn't ask you if I wasn't really jammed."

The old gentleman slowly shook his head. "We all have our financial problems. I'm afraid I can use the money too."

"Please, Mr. Thatcher—"

"I'm sorry, Harry."

"But I may be killed!"

Mr. Thatcher's small smile was

sympathetic, reassuring. "I'm certain you'll work it out," he said. He drained his glass. "Well, I guess that's it for now. Good night, Harry. I'll still be dropping in."

Harry could summon no parting words. It seemed unbelievable that Mr. Thatcher would turn him down. But he had, and that was that. Two days. Forty-eight hours. And then—

In sober truth, there was but one solution: give up his job, skip town. With the Syndicate's extensive operations, they still could run him down almost anywhere, but at least they'd first have to find him.

Harry had kept pushing the thought to the back of is mind ever since the start of his predicament. That night, after he'd been relieved at the tavern, had gulped a hasty supper and retreated to a fretful pacing of his shabby flat, the sober realization would not be shunted aside. Harry finally dragged a battered suitcase from beneath his bed, began packing.

And then he stopped, deliberately dumped the clothing. *Mr. Thatcher had to listen to him!* Four of those five hundred dollars were his only out. Mr. Thatcher's immediate need simply couldn't be as urgent. He'd visit him tonight, *make* him understand—

The sleet had stopped with nightfall, but it still was bitingly cold. The glow of purpose, however, warmed Harry as he trudged to Mr. Thatcher's boarding house, the address of which, with front room location, he knew from many conversations over those nightly beers.

But if the elements could not dampen Harry's determination, Mr. Thatcher could. He listened politely while Harry restated his position, again shook his head.

"I'm sorry," the old gentleman echoed.

Prepared for the rebuff, Harry steeled himself. "Why?" he demanded flatly.

Mr. Thatcher remained unruffled. "I've already told you," he said. "I have use for the money myself."

"But you can't need it as bad as I do!"

Mr. Thatcher smiled quietly. "I believe that's for me to say, Harry."

Harry sensed his appeal was again failing; he began to flounder. "But it would only be a loan," he said. "For just a short time. Until I could repay you."

"Which you might not do."

"But I would. I give you my word!"

Mr. Thatcher shook his head once more. "I'm afraid I can't take the risk."

Harry was perspiring now, his voice rising. "Mr. Thatcher, I told you—you don't realize what may happen to me."

The old gentleman's gaze was grave. "Believe me, Harry, I do." He sighed, as if to indicate the matter irrevocably closed. "But I still

can't advance you four hundred dollars."

The frank statement crushed Harry; he stared stonily at Mr. Thatcher, finally convinced of the futility of further pleading.

"All right," he muttered, a tic pulsing in his cheek as he swung toward the door. "Forget I asked for your help."

The harsh retort stung Mr. Thatcher; he flushed, tried to catch his visitor's arm. "Please, Harry, try to understand—"

Harry's control cracked; wheeling, he knocked down Mr. Thatcher's hand, roughly shoved him back. "I said, forget it—"

That was as far as Harry got. It

could have been he broke off at the sudden sharp crack of Mr. Thatcher's temple against the edge of the bureau as he lost his balance under Harry's push and fell. More likely, Harry's hiatus was at the abrupt vacancy of the old gentleman's features, the chilling lifelessness of his crumpled body.

Heart thudding, perspiration streaming, Harry bent fearfully over the still form at his feet. When he could detect no heart beat, dread confirmation rocketed through Harry's brain:

He's dead—and you killed him!

Harry straightened, fists balling, desperately fighting the chaos of his mind. He hadn't killed Mr. Thatcher—at least, he hadn't meant to. It had been an accident. The police would have to believe that—

Harry sucked in a deep breath, regained a shred of control. He wouldn't take that chance. Nobody knew he had visited Mr. Thatcher. He had come directly to the room. None of the other tenants or the landlady had seen him. If he managed now to slip quietly away, discovery of the body, whenever it came, could result only in an ultimate verdict of accidental death, the old gentleman having somehow tripped and hit his head while alone in his room.

Turning to leave, Harry paused as his gaze chanced to spot a familiar-looking envelope on top of the bureau. It was the business envelope Mr. Thatcher had had at the tavern and the five-hundred-dollar check was still inside.

Harry's mind raced; he'd successfully dallied with checks before, despite that one slip-up. If he could find a sample of Mr. Thatcher's signature and endorse the check accordingly, who could ever say Mr. Thatcher had not turned it over to him, say as a personal loan?

The first bureau drawer Harry tackled yielded Mr. Thatcher's check book, with several cancelled checks. The signature was bold, uncomplicated. Exultant, Harry shoved one of the checks and the

business envelope into his coat pocket, quietly left the room—to be blocked just as he eased the door shut by two stocky characters in bulky coats and low-brimmed hats.

"Going someplace, Thatcher?" one of the characters asked.

Harry's jaw dropped; for the moment, only the mistaken identity registered. "Thatcher? My name's not Thatcher—"

The man's grin was bleak. "Don't snow us. This's your address, your room."

Panic flooded Harry. Comprehension eluded him, but there was an unmistakable aura of menace about these two men. He had to get away.

"No," he protested, "you're wrong. I'm not Thatcher—"

Harry stopped as the second man abruptly plucked free the business envelope protruding from his pocket. "A little identification, maybe?" the man said, and then a counterpart grin split his lips. "He's Thatcher, all right," he told his associate. "He's even got a check for five C's and he was still stiffing us."

Harry's heart lurched; he knew now, with sickening certainty. These men were Syndicate hoods, on assignment. Their visitation meant Mr. Thatcher had done more than play the numbers; it meant that the personal problem or two the old gentleman had cited must have included a large-scale gambling debt on which he'd been stalling, and against which he'd perforce reserved for partial payment that five hundred dollar bonus. Mr. Thatcher, also jammed with the Syndicate, was evidently the sort of heavy defaulter Harry's own collector had assured him the Syndicate knew how to take care of . . .

"No, no!" Harry protested again. "You're making a mistake!"

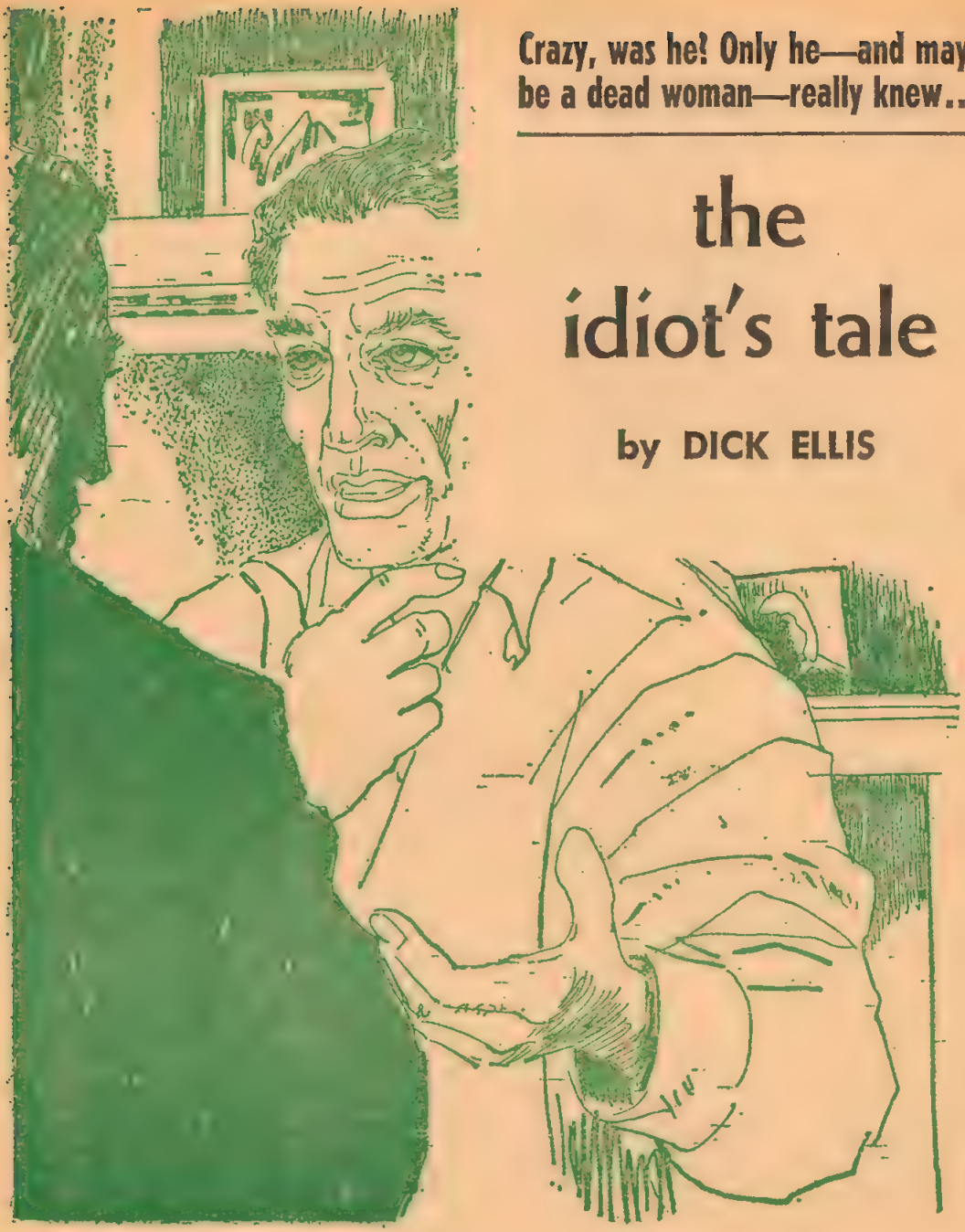
The second hood shook his head. "You made the mistake, Thatcher. You should've cashed this check, made part payment. Now, we've got orders."

Harry tried to scream but his throat locked. He struggled weakly, ineffectively.

The two hoods bustled him out to a waiting car.

Back in his room, Mr. Thatcher climbed unsteadily to his feet, gingerly massaging his temple. Glancing at the bureau top, he frowned suddenly; then, catching the echo of scuffling and muted mouthings outside, he cracked the window blind.

The tableau was brief, indecisive, but as the black sedan pulled away Mr. Thatcher eyed the bureau top again, believed he understood. He sighed deeply. It was too bad about Harry and that check, but it appeared he himself no longer had any worry about Syndicate reprisal—so long as he dropped out of sight. With his retirement, that should be easy, and Florida should be most pleasant this time of year.



Crazy, was he! Only he—and maybe a dead woman—really knew...

the idiot's tale

by DICK ELLIS

TWO ATTENDANTS brought Alfred Garson into the doctor's office. Garson, at the doctor's gesture, sat down facing the paper-cluttered desk.

"Good morning," Dr. Price said. He studied Garson's haggard face in the sunlight that entered through the heavily barred windows in a side wall of the office. He picked

up a manila file, one of many piled on the desk, flipped it open.

"All right, Alfred. I'm breaking hospital rules to see you without an appointment. But my first patient isn't due for a few moments. They told me you were quite insistent about seeing me. What is it that's so important?"

"Important!" Garson cried. "Listen, I been in this—this place for five days. All the attention I've got was when the cops first brought me here from the city. Then it was just some lousy orderly who took my blood-pressure, gave me these lousy clothes, and threw me in that damn cell."

Dr. Price said quietly, "Take it easy. Try to be calm."

"Save the bedside manner," Garson snapped. "I'm not one of your nuts."

"Of course not." Dr. Price leaned back in his chair, formed a steeple with his finger-tips. He smiled thinly. "You're just disturbed, Alfred. We want to help you—"

"Some help. Five days in that cell, looking at padded walls and the bugs, and listening to those creeps scream along the hall there. Day and night."

Garson was shaking. He was a thin, balding man with bloodshot eyes and stubbled cheeks. He wore a sleeveless pull-over shirt, cotton trousers without a belt, and soft-soled slippers.

Now he clenched together hands too big for his spindly arms, in an attempt to get a semblance of control of himself.

"You must understand that we are very badly overcrowded here, Alfred," the doctor said. "Too many prison, too many patients, not nearly enough personnel. As for the bugs—"

"Don't tell me they ain't real—"

"They're real enough, I'm afraid," the doctor sighed unhappily. "There's just too much to do to worry about bugs. You'll get used to them. Now—"

Garson started to get up. At once the attendants were on either side, pressing him back into the chair.

He snorted, "Oh, for—I'm not going anywhere."

"That's right, Alfred," the doctor murmured. "You're not going anywhere. You'll be here with us for at least ninety days. If we decide it's best, you'll be here quite a long time, perhaps."

Garson's thin face twisted. He gave a whimper. "This isn't the way I thought—not what I expected."

"Now, Alfred," the doctor beamed. "Just calm down. Relax. Make the best of it. I'll see you again just as soon as I possibly can get back."

"When will that be?"

Dr. Price pronged the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, massaged gently. Even though the day had hardly begun,

his face was gray and lined with fatigue.

"So many," he said to himself. "So damn many." He looked at Garson. "I should be able to fit you in, say, a week from today. We'll discuss your problems then—"

This time Garson did lunge to his feet, in spite of the two burly attendants. "You mean I'm supposed to sit in that cell another week?"

"Sorry. There's just nothing to be done about it."

"Listen, I can't take that. This is all wrong. This ain't the way it was supposed to be."

The doctor showed a flash of anger. "What did you expect in the prison ward of the state mental hospital? A country club? Good-by, Alfred."

The attendants started the struggling, protesting Garson toward the door. "Please, give me just a couple of minutes. I tell you I was faking there at that sanity-hearing! I was faking. Please—"

He was so obviously desperate that Dr. Price, who was not a cruel man, said, "All right. Hold it a minute, boys. Come back and sit down, Alfred." When Garson was again seated, the doctor went on, "Look. You had a hearing in the city. It was decided to commit you here for the usual ninety-day observation period—usual in cases like yours, where there is a definite question of sanity. Now—"

"But that's just it," Garson said, leaning forward in desperate earnestness. "I was faking, don't you see? I figured to beat the rap with a plea of insanity. I didn't know what I was letting myself in for, or I'd never have done it. Believe me, I wouldn't."

Dr. Price studied him with interest. He reopened Garson's file, read briefly. "You were found standing over the dead body of a woman at the motel where you worked. You told the police that you did it because of voices that spoke to you out of a mist. The voices had told you to knife two other women at the motel, during the weeks preceding the murder—"

"All a lot of baloney," Garson said. "Hell, I never heard any voices or anything else. I killed that dame, Marie, because there was no other way out of the bind she had me in. Stabbing those other two, that was just setting the stage."

In the brief silence that followed, Dr. Price shook his head slowly.

"Very interesting example of sado-masochistic syndrome," he mused. "The desire for punishment, even going to the electric-chair on the one side, and the instinct for self-preservation, which of course manifests itself in an admission of deep mental disturbance, as your voices in the mist, and a cry for help—"

"Ah, knock it off, Doc," Garson said disgustedly. "Let me tell you the truth. Anything to get out of

this snake-pit. I'll take my chances with a jury and going to the chair. Any thing is better than this. Anything!"

He asked for and received a cigarette. He smoked it hungrily. The doctor watched him through slitted eyes.

"It was like this," Garson said. "I was the night clerk at a motel in the city there. Not much of a job, but—"

The doctor said drily, "You should have had much better, but the world was against you."

Garson laughed shortly. "Hooey. It was as good as I could expect. The little education I got. There was this dame worked there. Marie. One of the maids, you know. She and I had an—arrangement going. She'd come over, during the day, spend an hour or two in my cabin, several times a week. What I didn't know, until it was too late, was that Marie was married. To a small-time punk there in the city. All muscles and no brain. A goon, you know?"

Garson stabbed out his cigarette in a tray on the desk. He grimaced wryly.

"Who knows about dames?" he said. "All of a sudden Marie wanted me to take off with her, go away somewhere, start a new life—that kind of jazz. I didn't want any part of it. I was tired of her anyhow, by then. So then she springs it on me about this goon husband. Either I do it her way or she tells the husband, and he more than likely fills me full of slugs. He was the type.

"But even if I did take off with her, he might follow. I'd be looking over my shoulder from there on in. You see? A real bind. The idea of being stuck with that dame permanently made me sick to my stomach. But if I didn't go along with it—"

Dr. Price stirred, glanced at his watch. "Yes, well. We'll discuss it more next week."

"No, wait. Just a little more. Those other two dames. I'd read this book. About a nut who got his kicks stabbing women. It was a true book. When they caught him, he got off with a couple years in a mental hospital, then walked out scot free. The book described the way he acted, what he said and did.

"Well, hell, why couldn't I pull the same thing. All I had to do was follow the pattern. So I sneaked into these dames' cabins and cut them up a little—not enough to really hurt them. Heck, I had nothing against them."

Dr. Price coughed. "Of course not. It was the idea of the knife. Stabbing a sleeping woman. It excited you. Gave you a sense of fulfillment you couldn't possibly get otherwise—"

"No! Good lord, Doc, I'm not a sex nut or something. I'm telling you, I was just following the pattern. So then I was set. Marie came to my cabin one morning and I

really let her have it. I made enough noise so that somebody was sure to hear and call the cops, which is what happened. Then I started with the jazz about hearing voices. It was all straight out of that book—"

Dr. Price leaned forward, tapped a thick forefinger on the desk-top. "Alfred, you're rationalizing. Oh, maybe you did read this book. And found in it a way to satisfy your own deep cravings—"

"For crying out loud!" Garson shouted. "I was in a bind with no way out. That dame was on me like a leech. I wanted to be rid of her, but I didn't want her husband filling me full of bullet holes afterwards. People around the motel knew what was going on. If Marie turned up dead they'd put the finger right on me. I didn't have a chance to pull it off and get away. But if I built up this psycho business, don't you see? That would solve everything. Sure, I'd have to spend a couple years in a hospital, but then I'd be free."

The doctor grunted cynically. "But now you've decided to confess. Why, Alfred?"

"Are you kidding?" Garson yelled. "Go spend five days in that lousy padded cell, listening to those screams day and night, with bugs crawling all over you!"

"You'd prefer prison, perhaps even death?"

"I'll tell the world!" Garson swallowed, went on in a quieter tone, "Doc, I did a two-year fall for burglary when I was a kid. Those two years weren't nearly as long as these last five days have been. Not nearly."

Dr. Price pushed to his feet. He shook his head. "I have a patient waiting, Alfred. You'll have to go now. We'll talk more next week."

"I can't stand another week of this!"

"Of course you can," the doctor said, with an attempt at jovality. "What's ninety days? Five of them are already gone. After our visit next week, perhaps we can move you to better quarters—one of the regular wards, where you'll have

company. Now you really must go."

At his nod, the two big attendants lifted Garson to his feet, half-dragged him out the door.

"You're killing me!" Garson screamed back over his shoulder. "You're killing me!"

When he was alone, the doctor sat back down, plucked thoughtfully at his lower lip. It was possible that the man was telling the truth. But, on the other hand—

Well, it would just have to wait. Dr. Price wearily eyed the stacks of manila folders cluttering his desk. He picked up the top one, flipped it open. He buzzed for his assistant to bring in the first patient of the day. The first of many.

He wondered briefly if he would be able to get to Alfred Garson a week from today.

"So many," he said. "So many."

The two attendants took Garson back to the admission ward, turned him over to the guards there, who would return him to his cell. Garson was sobbing as they led him away.

The attendants left, strolled across the concrete, walled yard back the way they had come. One of them said, "What do you think, Mac? Was that guy leveling there in the doctor's office, or wasn't he?"

Mac pursed his lips, considering. Then he shrugged. "I don't know. It's one of them academic questions, anyway."

"How's that?"

"If Garson wasn't nuts when they brought him in—"

A particularly harrowing shriek rose from the admission-ward behind them. It died away into a moan of protest.

"—he soon will be."

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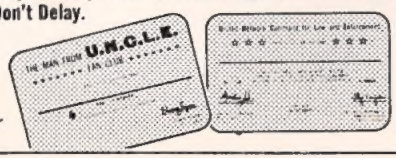

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